

SPELLBOUND

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**THE STORY OF
ARTHUR DENNISTON CLAIRE**

BY

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BOMBAY

THACKER & CO., LTD.

1943

FIRST PUBLISHED OCTOBER 1943

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*Set and printed in India by J. J. Khambatta at Jam-e-Jamshed
Printing Press, Mangalore Street, Ballard Estate, & Published by
C. Murphy, Manager, Thacker & Co., Ltd., Rampart Row, Bombay.*

CHAPTER I

DR. STEDMAN came out of my mother's bedroom looking, strangely grave and reflective, though he banished the look at once and tried to appear his old cheery self on perceiving me.

"Well, doctor, how do you find my mother this morning?" I asked, with an assumption of gaiety which I was far from feeling; my mother's condition, as a matter of fact, having given rise to grave anxiety for some months past.

"Mrs. Claire is neither better nor worse than when I saw her a week ago," said Dr. Stedman with the old smile with which he invariably answered my questions.

"She is certainly weaker, doctor," I suggested.

"Well, I think she is a good bit weaker," admitted the doctor; "but she will soon get over that when once summer is here and she is able to go out into the open."

"Then there is no immediate anxiety as to the future, is there?" I asked.

"I shouldn't like to be too definite," was Dr. Stedman's reply, and there was a return of the grave look which I had remarked as he came out of the room. "In cases of this sort one can never be positive about anything, you know. How much longer does your leave extend, Mr. Claire?"

"A month more," said I. "Would you advise me to apply for an extension?—because, you see, if the worst is to happen, I may as well be here and see that she receives proper care and attention."

Dr. Stedman reflected a moment.

"It would be best if you applied for a month or two's extension of your leave," he said gravely. "Mrs. Claire does not appear to me to be growing any worse; but what I

do not like about the case is the insomnia of which you say she complains ;—and the restlessness which she exhibits during the day. There is something on her mind that seems to me to be worrying her, and at her present age and in the state of health she has been in these past two years this probably accounts for the gradual decay of her faculties we now notice. Do you think you could get her to open her mind to you ? ”

“ I will try to persuade her,” I said ; “ though I hardly hope to succeed. She has been in a state of anxiety on my account ever since I took up my appointment in India, but do what I will I cannot get her to explain to me what there is to be nervous about. All her letters to me have been full of vague cautions to be careful ; she writes as if she feared some great catastrophe were about to befall me, and yet when I ask her to be explicit she says she cannot explain her feelings.”

“ Ah ! ” exclaimed Dr. Stedman ; “ it is just as I suspected. It was the same when she asked me to write and tell you to come home on leave. She told me she felt as if she was not long for this world but that she would like to have you near her before the end, as there was something she particularly wanted to tell you.”

“ I have been two months here already,” I remarked, “ and yet she has said nothing.”

“ I cannot understand it,” said Dr. Stedman. “ Perhaps it is merely the natural anxiety a mother feels for her only and dearly loved son.”

“ Perhaps,” I said. “ Still I should feel more comfortable myself if she would speak out.”

At this moment there was the gentle tinkle of the bell which always stood on a table within easy reach of my mother’s hand, and hearing it, and recognizing that it would probably mean a summons to the invalid’s side, I bade the doctor ‘ Good morning ’ and went in.

It was as I surmised.

“ Mrs. Claire wishes to see you, sir,” said the day nurse coming to the door of the bedroom.

I found my mother, as I had found her often before, lying in a comfortable invalid chair, doing nothing special—but in a sort of semiconscious doze. She seemed to recognise my presence in the room, lightly as I had entered it, and opening her eyes said softly :

“ Denisten, come here ; I wish to speak to you.”

I drew a chair to her and sat down.

"Where is Hetty?" my mother asked as soon as I was seated.

"She is in her bedroom," I replied. "She has not been feeling very well this morning."

"I hope it isn't anything serious," my mother went on in her old kindly manner, for she had a genuine affection for my wife, more on my account than her own, I fear, as most mothers will who have only one chick in the world to absorb all the affection of their natures. "Give Hetty my love and tell her I hope she will soon be herself again."

I promised to convey the message at the earliest possible moment.

"Now, draw your chair a little nearer to me, Deniston, as my voice is not very strong and what I have to say concerns you alone and nobody else. Tell nurse not to disturb us for a quarter of an hour."

I did as my mother bade me, and taking her hand in my own pressed it affectionately while waiting to hear what she might have to communicate.

"What I am about to tell you my son," my mother presently resumed, "is the story of my own life, a very important part of which had to do with you, my only child. Years ago when we were first married, your father and I were stationed at a place far away in the interior of India where there were few Europeans with whom we could associate. He was in the Indian Civil Service—that service, which, notwithstanding my entreaties, he would have his son enter,—the service you are now engaged in, and which has been the chief source of all the anxiety I have felt on your account."

"Surely, mother, you can see for yourself now, that there is nothing to be anxious about because I am in the Indian Civil Service," I remarked, gently smoothing the thin, wasted hand which I held in my own. "I have been a good many years now in the service, without ache or pain of any sort, and, please God, I hope to enjoy as many more before I have done with my career and laid on the shelf."

"I hope and pray to God you may have long years of health and happiness in store for you, my son," my mother said solemnly. "I have watched and prayed these many years, but still I fear that the powers of darkness will prevail in the end. Six years married and no little one to bless your household. Do I not see in that a sign that the fatality I have been fighting against these many years must eventually occur?"

"Do not worry yourself on that account," I said soothingly.
"Hetty and I are quite content to go on as we are."

I said this more by way of relieving the very evident solicitude my mother seemed to display at my wife's apparent sterility than from any secretly cherished hope on my own part that the defect might soon be remedied. Whether I succeeded in convincing my mother I cannot say, but judging from the state of my own mind I should say not; however she said nothing for a while, but merely contented herself with sighing once or twice.

When she spoke again it was in a curiously hushed tone of voice.

"Deniston," she asked; "have you ever read any books on Hindu mythology?"

"Why, yes, mother," I said, "several of them. In fact I take rather an interest in studying the religious forms, customs and ceremonies of the people of the country in which I live."

"Ah! I thought so," said my mother. "Then you have probably heard of the god called Mahadeo?"

"I have read some curious observances connected with the cult of Mahadeo," I observed.

"Have you read of the rite known as *sri gupata*?"

"What? the practice of ascetics who throw themselves down from the precipice of the Mahadeo hills?—I think I have read something about it somewhere," I replied; "but the practice is very rare nowadays and appears to be dying out. Why do you ask me about it, mother?"

"Because I've been thinking very frequently of it of late, Deniston. In my younger days when I was in India I often heard of men, mere boys some of them, who sacrificed themselves to Mahadeo. And I was a witness to one such sacrifice, an involuntary witness it is true, but still a witness of the horrid custom."

"Why distress yourself with such thoughts, mother?" I said by way of reassuring her. "The practice is discouraged by the more enlightened among the Hindus themselves, and Government is using its best endeavours to put it down."

"I am glad of that," said my mother. "It's a horrid custom and ought to be stopped. I remember, years ago, before you were born, Deniston, seeing a great crowd of persons on some hills. A fair seemed to be in progress, for there were booths standing in a long row, with whirligigs and merry-go-rounds in full swing behind them. At the foot of the hill another great crowd appeared to be similarly enjoying itself.

Your father who was Assistant Collector of the district at the time, was there on duty to see that the public peace was not disturbed, and I was standing beside him taking in the scene and breathing the fresh air of the morning. Suddenly, as with a single accord, all the thousands present shouted "*Mahadeo ! Mahadeo Ki Jai !*" (Victory to Mahadeo) and looking up I was in time to see the figure of a man falling through space, and disappearing among the rocks at the foot of the hill. The sight quite unnerved me, and I never again in all my life afterwards had the courage to venture near an Indian fair. How all those thousands of persons could complacently look on while one of God's creatures, a young and innocent man, went to his death in that public fashion, passes my understanding ; and when I think of the callous, idle curiosity of that great multitude surging forward to view the remains I shudder at the thought of man's inhumanity to man."

There was a pause in the conversation while my mother stared abstractedly into space. Then with a sudden convulsive clutch she seized my arm.

"Deniston," she exclaimed, "do you know why that young man went to his doom in that fashion ?"

"He had some silly notion about fulfilling a vow, I suppose," I said as indifferently as I could in the hope that by so doing I might turn my mother's thoughts into other channels.

"Yes," she said ; "his mother's vow ; though why you call it silly I don't know. It may have been wrong on his mother's part to make such a vow ; as we have no right to condemn any one, much less our own flesh and blood to early death. Still, the ways of Providence are mysterious, and a vow made by a wife into whose life has not as yet come the joys or sorrows of motherhood is a very serious thing, and must be treated seriously in all conscience."

I let the remark pass unheeded, because in the state of her health then to have ventured a contradiction would have meant a discussion, and a discussion was what I most desired to avoid, though in my earlier youth, when my mother was in more robust health I had frequently talked on such topics with her.

"Do you know, Deniston," she resumed presently, "I have frequently of late recalled one such instance in my own experience. Years ago when we were out in the country, your father and I, a young married English couple of our acquaintance had no children. They were such a loving pair : he so good natured and kind, so gentle and considerate to her in all things, and she passionately devoted to him.

But, though they had been married a number of years the union had not been blessed with children; and Mrs. X— I will call her Mrs. X for the present,—felt keenly disappointed. There are some men in whom nature has implanted the instinct of paternity in a stronger degree than in others; they are meant to be the fathers of families, being endowed with all the attributes of the paternal male in a pre-eminent degree. To them home and children represent the ideal of family life, and when the one or other is not in place they seem to realize that they have missed the *raison d'être* of their existence. Now Mr. X was just such a man. He was not what is vulgarly called luxurious, but there was in him the innate love of the man for the child, the understanding of their little wants and ways, and the big natured sympathy with their aspirations that fills the heart of the paternal male. Mrs. X was not long in discovering this trait in her husband's character and the thought that there was no little one to fill her own house with the sunshine of a child's presence soon became a kind of nightmare with her.

"Out in the East where the young English wife is sometimes for days and weeks together, without the company of others of her own sex and station in life, the presence, as you know, Deniston, of an ayah in the house counts for much in the way of companionship. In the case of Mrs. X the ayah and she were often for days and weeks thrown together in intimate discourse over the daily affairs of the household. The husband was a district officer whose work took him away for a certain number of hours each day and in the interval Mrs. X had no one but her ayah to talk to; and it need cause no surprise when I say that it was not long before the young wife opened her mind to her serving-woman on the subject that was exercising her most serious thoughts."

My mother paused slightly to recover her breath before she resumed.

"There is a sub-stratum of superstition in almost all of us, whether we are willing to acknowledge its presence or not." She continued after a brief space. "It is the feeling inborn in human nature that there is some higher and more dominant intelligence than our own, some influence before which man's puny efforts sink into insignificance. It is the feeling that makes man cry out to his Creator when he thinks that he is not otherwise likely to attain those things which are beyond the gift of the ordinary mortal. It is man's first efforts at prayer; the calling upon God to make good the want and wishes which he stands most in need of at the moment. And what is there that man does not need? Every Christian Church, every heathen temple, every way-side shrine be it in civilized land or the wilds of densest

Africa, bears testimony to the manifold nature of his wants and desires.

"Can we wonder at it then, that when Mrs. X told her ayah of her secret sorrow the latter should suggest a recourse to certain remedies ?

"Seeta told her mistress of many cases within her own experience where women who had been childless for years had at length become mothers after propitiating certain deities. The young Englishwoman listened attentively to all that was said and when Seeta suggested some form of offering on her own account it is easy to understand how readily the mistress concurred in the suggestion. The question was now where was the offering to be made ?

"Seeta thought that it would be quite as effective if the tutelary deity of the village at which they were then encamped were propitiated in orthodox manner with offerings of fruit and flowers. The habits of a lifetime had accustomed the servant to pay reverence to the shapeless, vermillion stained blocks of stone that were curiously held to contain the spirits of reputedly great deities. In this she was but following the beliefs inculcated by many generations of her ancestors, of course, but to the delicate sense of her young mistress there seemed something repugnant in a creed which called on its votaries to pay their homage to inanimate things without one single claim to beauty or reverence.

"What could such a red painted stone do for her, offer it though she might ten thousand gifts of fruits and flowers ? Mrs. X argued of course as most of us are apt to argue," said my mother, "gifts are in their very nature personal appeals to the benevolent side of the deity appealed to, and that the degree of intelligence of the deity is to be inferred, as it is in most human beings, from outward appearances. A benign countenance is a sure and certain index to a benevolent heart, whereas an uncouth, unshaped stone must represent an equally uncouth and unshapely intelligence on the part of the god it represents. It is the same in most of our concerns in every day life. We lose sight of the figurative nature of the image that is worshipped and forget that in invoking its aid man is but appealing to his Creator whom otherwise it would be impossible for him to picture to his imagination.

"However, Mrs. X could not be brought to throw her gifts away on the village godling. Seeta might do so if she had a mind to—her mistress half hoped she would relieve her of the duty—but as for her, Mrs. X, she would wait. So Seeta was constrained to abandon the project since she held

—no doubt with a good deal of justification—that such vicarious propitiation would be ineffective.

"But the female mind, when once it begins to dally with the idea of a votive offering, finds no rest except in the final accomplishment of its purpose. Such was the case in the present instance. Having started out with the idea of propitiating the deity for the gift of motherhood to her mistress the ayah felt it incumbent on her to see that her promises to both sides were duly fulfilled. She remembered that a temple of Shiva was situated some five miles up the river at which they were encamped, and so it was resolved that an expedition to this temple should be planned for a day when business would require that Mr. X should be away for greater part of the day.

Accordingly when the husband informed his wife at dinner one evening that his duties next day would probably necessitate his absence till late the following night Mrs. X thought that the occasion for which they had waited had arrived and told Seeta to make her preparations for the expedition.

CHAPTER II

MR. X rode away to his work next morning bright and early, leaving his young wife and her ayah in a state of nervous excitement that was difficult to conceal.

"The Collector's camp was situated in a grove of mango trees on the river bank, a pleasant enough situation during the hot weather which was yet some months off, but a quagmire, more or less, during the rains. I daresay you know quite well the sort of place I mean, Dennis," said my mother, "as you are probably quite used to camping in similar circumstances. Well, as I have said, Mr. X rode off on his visit to the neighbouring village, and he had hardly gone when preparations were at once begun by Mrs. X and her ayah for carrying out their projected visit to the temple of Mahadeo. The car was ordered to be ready in half an hour which time Mrs. X thought would be needed in order to make herself ready for the journey, and at the end of that time mistress and ayah set forth on their queer errand.

"On the advice of Seeta, Mrs. X had provided herself with a couple of wicker flower-baskets which would be necessary, she was assured, for the gifts they were about to present to the god at the temple. They pulled up at the first village through which they passed, and while Seeta went off to make the needed purchases Mrs. X remained in the car satisfying the cravings of a group of dusty urchins who had crowded round crying out for coppers. Mrs. X soon found the supply of coppers in her purse exhausted, and as two or three of the smallest among the children had not been made happy by the gift of a piece, Seeta was appealed to on her return and had to give the necessary coins out of the change she had with her. Then the car went on again and the young wife looked back upon her encounter with the children as an incident of happy augury on such a day.

"The temple of Mahadeo stood on the river bank, with its entrance facing the stream. It was built in the prevailing

fashion of the country, that is to say its buildings were enclosed by a high stone wall and formed a quadrangle with the temple proper occupying the centre of the limited space left at the disposal of the builders. In the palmy days of its existence it must have attracted within its portals a vast concourse of pilgrims whose offerings helped to maintain a numerous assembly of officiating priests and their more numerous progeny. There was certainly enough and to spare in the way of habitable accommodation round and about the main shrine, but with the rise to greater eminence of other sanctuaries, that of Mahadeo had sunk into comparative insignificance, deserted alike by its former devotees and its self-seeking ministrants.

"When Mrs. X and her ayah arrived at the river front of the temple they found the place practically deserted. Seeta's purchases at the village had included a variety of articles ranging from cocoanuts and flowers to turmeric, ochre and jaggery or uncrystalised sugar. It offended the aesthetic taste of Mrs. X that the gifts should be presented in a form so undignified as in a leaf or paper wrapping, so while the car sped on its way she arranged the flowers as best she could in one of the baskets, leaving Seeta to deposit the rest of the bargains in the other basket. Each now descended with a basket on her arm, and bidding the chauffeur keep the car in the shade of some trees they mounted the stone steps that led up from the water's edge to the temple entrance.

"The interior court of the temple seemed as deserted as the exterior, and had it not been for a low chanting which appeared to proceed from the depths of some unknown recess the two women might have turned back in the belief that the place was abandoned by its inhabitants. The soft cooing of some doves, however, relieved the place of its air of gloom while the chanting assured them that they were not quite alone. They accordingly went on, ascended more steps that led from the entrance to the temple proper, and paused at the door. The voice of the ministering priest now seemed quite near and as they gazed into the darkened interior of the shrine before them they could observe several tiny lights moving to and fro as the priest passed the tray on which stood his votive offerings over and around the head of the presiding deity of the institution.

"The sun was now shining brightly outside and the shadow of their presence must have been cast on the sanctuary since it attracted the attention of the ministrant. He went on chanting his prayers, however, waving the brass tray with its five-branched lamp, its rose petals, bilva leaves, small

gift of rice, and bit of cocoanut, round and round the face of the deity. When he had done he took a pinch of ochre from the tray and stuck it with great exactitude in the centre of his forehead, between the eyes, and emptying the contents at the foot of the shrine came forth, tray in hand, to see what good fortune the visit of the strangers held in store.

"Mrs. X and her ayah were now standing in the inner court of the temple and could view without difficulty the shrine. To the young Englishwoman the sight of the image with its five heads and ten hands was a curious revelation, but she was not permitted to carry her observations further, as the priest now approached and addressed them.

"Who are you and what do you want here?" he asked, addressing Seeta.

"We have come to make offering at the shrine," said Seeta.

"Who is she?" he continued indicating Mrs. X.

"My mistress is the Collector Sahib's memsahib," said Seeta.

"Does she, too, desire to make offerings or comes she here only to look on and make fun?" inquired the priest severely.

"My mistress is without children," Seeta made haste to answer, "and she has come to propitiate Mahadeo in order that by her reverence the Regenerator of mankind may have pity on her and grant her the blessings of motherhood."

"'Tis well," remarked the priest, who during all this time had taken careful stock of the young Englishwoman. "'Tis well. Tell the lady to remove her shoes."

Seeta conveyed the intimation to her mistress, and handing over the baskets with their contents to the priest, set about untying the laces of her mistress's shoes. These were soon slipped off and Mrs. X stood on the cold flags in her stocking feet.

The priest had already squatted himself on his haunches and soon had the contents of the baskets transferred to his tray. The flowers he placed on one side, the rice—of which Seeta had purchased a full measure—he heaped up in the centre; then from out of the small paper parcels he proceeded to take the turmeric, sugar, and other ingredients.

Still the all-essential to the successful propitiation of the god was not forthcoming and Mrs. X thought she heard an audible sniff from the direction of the priest just as she stood up in her stockings.

"My mistress desires to add five rupees in silver to those gifts," said Seeta hastily as she, too, divined the reason for the priestly sniff.

"Mrs. X opened her purse which she had brought, with her for the express purpose, took out the coins, and handed them over."

"The feel of the silver had a softening effect on the priestly countenance where the niggardliness of the latter day devotee had begun to stamp the indelible look that seems to express so clearly the sickening of heart that comes of hope deferred."

"'Tis well," he said with more animation than he had yet displayed. "The gift of motherhood is a valuable acquisition and should be propitiated with generous offerings."

"The hard look passed out of his eyes as he placed the five silver coins on his tray and annointed them each with a pinch of turmeric. Then he rose went into the inner sanctuary, and brought thence the tiny five-branched lamp with its floating dips which he had used a while before in his own morning's devotions. Making a dent in the top of the rice he fixed the lamp firmly on it, and raising the tray and its contents on the palm of his left hand which he rested on his shoulder he bade them follow him.

Chanting the praises of the god the priest, followed by Seeta and her mistress, the one behind the other, walked round the shrine, keeping their right hands nearest the wall. Seven times they made the circuit of the building touching the wall with their right hands as they passed each side until Mrs. X felt her head swim and her feet totter with the speed of their journey. During all this time the priest kept up a monotonous chant, the words of which were incomprehensible to the two women, though the sound broke in on the young Englishwoman's consciousness with a kind of dreamy reiteration. When at last she seemed on the point of sinking into a very vertigo of insensibility she woke up with a start. A bell had clanged violently and she stepped into the inner sanctuary of the shrine behind the others.

"Never to this day," said my mother suddenly sitting upright, her whole face aglow with animation, "never to this day have I been able to account for the change I then observed in the shrine. As I told you before, Dennis, Seeta and I had been standing in such a position when we first entered the inner court of the temple that we could inspect the shrine itself from where we stood. I think I have told you, too, that the image we then observed was the "Panchanan" or five headed form of the god Mahadeo. Imagine the shock to my feelings, therefore, when instead of the Panchanan I found myself standing face to face with the

frightful features of the black goddess Kali. I remember every detail of what followed with great distinctness as my senses were acutely alert all in a moment. It was a life-size image of the goddess with three glaring eyes, a huge gaping mouth all blood-stained, with tongue protruding, a necklet of human skull round her nude body, and a girdle of human hands round her hips. There were pearl and gold ornaments on her four arms, and she appeared to be trampling on the body of a man. It was one of the most fearsome sights I have ever beheld, and I cannot express to you the feelings with which I gazed on it, fascinated as it were by the very awfulness of the apparition."

"While I was gazing on it with wide open eyes and lips agape with astonishment I heard the priest chanting his prayer in front of the image, waving the tray to and fro until the five little lights on it danced in a frenzy of fluttering delight, as it seemed to me."

"Hail ! O Devi, consort of Shiva, behold a worshipper hath need of thy intercession. Salutation, O three-eyed Kali, destroyer of evil spirits, we pray thee, destroy the spirit that prevents the reproduction of life in this thy suppliant who in return for thy boon shall agree to devote her first born son to thy service. O goddess of the iron sceptre smite now thy enemies, devour their bodies, drink their blood, accept this sacrifice we now offer thee, and grant us this boon in token whereof we now place on thy shrine this our humble offering."

"Then turning and addressing me the priest said : Mother Kali demands of thee thy first born male child as her sacrifice. See that thou fulfil her injunction. Go now in peace, thy boon shall be granted thee."

"I thought the eyes of the image flashed wrathfully at me as I looked up into its face, and certainly from that day to this I have never forgotten the impression that it created on my mind.

"I was trembling like an aspen leaf when we emerged into the fresh morning air and I know my ayah was equally affected because she said to me in a whisper : " Give the priest another five rupees for Mahadeva as he has given the first five to Devi Mahadeva's Sakti (consort)."

"So I opened my purse again and with trembling fingers, I know, and a very ashen face I took out the money and handed it over to the man, who salaamed as he took it. What the priest thought of me I cannot say ; all I remember is that I felt dreadfully anxious to get back to the car and drive away from the place as fast as ever I could. I never again set foot in a Hindu temple that I can remember, and

only once afterwards did I set eyes on that priest, as I shall in due course narrate. But never forgot the look or the words with which he accepted my further contribution. "The memsahib has seen the Devi's eyes sparkle. 'Tis well; her desire will be fulfilled."

"We got back to the car with all speed and reached our encampment without mishap. The fresh air and exhilarating motion of the drive homewards helped to bring back my wonted calm and we alighted at our camp none the worse for our morning's venture. By the time breakfast was over both Seeta and I had regained our usual spirits and were able to laugh heartily at the fright we had had in being so unceremoniously thrust into the presence of the most dreaded goddess of the Hindu pantheon. We resolved, nevertheless, to say nothing about the morning's visit to your father, feeling that he might be justly annoyed at our escapade; but I regretted all my life afterwards that I kept this one and only secret from him during the few years of married bliss that was vouchsafed to us by a merciful Providence. I have grieved often and often afterwards that I had not told him my secret, for I feel sure he would have helped me to bear my burden in the cheerfully optimistic spirit that was always his."

CHAPTER III

"DO I bore you with my talk, Dennis?" My mother inquired, looking at me with the odd pathetic gaze I had since lately observed in her.

"No, no,—not at all, mother; go on. I assure you I am greatly interested in what follows, especially as I am sure it nearly concerns myself."

"It does, indeed, Dennis," said my mother, "but if you feel tired I can easily defer what I have to say to some future occasion."

"Not at all, Mother. If it pleases you to speak and the exertion does not overtax your strength I am quite content to go on listening to you as long as you care to talk."

"Thank you, Dennis," said my mother gently pressing the hand that had so far lain in both of hers. "I was under the impression you would vote your poor old mother a chatter-box, and be glad to make your escape from her. But I feel that I must relieve my mind of its burden now, once for all. I have been tormented by such dreadful visions at all hours of the day and night whenever I sleep; I have seen your father come to my bedside and say in his well-known deep-toned voice: 'Clara, Clara, why did you make so dreadful a promise?'—'I made no promise, Arthur,' I assure him. 'But at least you acquiesced in the promise when it was made, didn't you?' he repeats; and I have to acknowledge that I say nothing at the time, being indeed too frightened to speak, and that my silence may have been misconstrued into acquiescence, though I had never intended it should be.—Then there are those other visions in which I see the black face and form of the goddess Kali who always asks me one single question: 'Have you told the boy of his mother's vow?' To which I always reply: 'I made no vow and do not intend to tell him anything' at which she scowls dreadfully and disappears."

"Last night I dreamt of Kali again. She seemed to be hovering backwards and forwards through the room looking for some one. 'Hasten and tell the boy of thy vow that he may fulfil it, for thy time is short,' she said several times to me. ——'I will not,' I made answer. 'The boy is my only son, and I never promised to sacrifice him to thee.' 'Then thy son's wife shall be childless all her days and thy name perish with him,' returned the dreadful goddess."

"With that I awoke with a start and remained awake for the rest of the night, Dennis, thinking of you."

My mother's words needless to say had a strange effect on me. They served to reveal much of her character and behaviour that had hitherto appeared incomprehensible to me : her anxiety to have me constantly with her as a child, her fears that some unknown evil might overtake me during the years of adolescence I had spent in school and college ; and lastly the strange vehemence with which she had wrestled with me in argument, seeking to turn me from my purpose to enter the Indian Civil Service as my father had done. All seemed to me now as plain as daylight and yet ? Was it blind chance or the strange workings of fate that made me choose of all the careers open to me in the world the one that in the opinion of my mother held for me the most risks to life and health ? I have always held that heredity plays no insignificant part in determining a man's career. The predominant characteristic of some by-gone ancestor irresistibly asserts itself in the shaping of our destinies, and unless the influence of environment and acquired habits are strong enough to counteract that tendency we may take it for granted that there will always be a reversion to type in certain strong natures.

From early youth the East had always possessed a strong attraction for me ; I had felt it in my very blood, so to say, and the ruling passion had prevailed when the time came for me to choose a career. Still, when I come to think of it, what must it not have cost my mother to agree, as she did at last to my choice of the Indian Civil Service as a career ? What years of anxious thought must they not have been to her when I first went out ? And when I at last married and settled down she seemed undoubtedly more easy in mind, as her letters showed, as if the fears that had engrossed her thoughts were being one by one dispelled.

But were they really dispelled ? I am inclined to doubt the fact, for what I had just heard showed clearly enough that the maternal love, strong even in death, was still wrestling with the spirit of evil on account of him she loved.

"Do not let such thoughts worry you, mother," I said seeking to cheer up the good soul. "You see we are Christians and such foolish beliefs should not be allowed to influence our lives. Nothing really has happened to me, as you observe, mother."

"Yes, Dennis, I see that quite well; but what about Hetty?"

"Hetty is all right, too; don't you see?"

My mother sighed wearily as she averted her head from me.

"Yes, Hetty is all right," she exclaimed. "Still the curse of the unfulfilled vow will remain with her; she will die childless."

To say that I was troubled by this attitude of my mother's, hardly expresses the state of astonishment with which I heard the last remark.

"You surely do not expect me to fulfil your vow, mother, and offer myself a sacrifice to the goddess?" I remarked quietly.

Slowly my mother brought her face back to its original position and turned her large grey eyes on me. The abruptness of my question had brought home to her wandering faculties the full significance of her attitude.

"No, no, Dennis; I never promised anything," she said with a convulsive gasp. "I made no vow. You are free to do as you please."

"Very well, mother; I mean to do as I please. So do not let any more dreams trouble you," I said by way of distracting her thoughts.

She made no reply, and as the nurse just then came in, saying it was time my mother had some nourishment, I left them together and walked out of the apartment. As I did so I thought I caught the reflection of Hetty's face in one of the mirrors on the wall. It was but a passing glimpse and I was much too distracted by what I had heard to give the circumstance a second thought. Still, years afterwards, I recalled the incident, trifling as it had seemed, for it was fraught with consequences of the gravest import to myself. Hetty must have been sitting behind the Japanned screen partitioning my mother's bedroom and heard all that passed between us.

However, as I have said, I was much too distracted at the moment to give the thing a second thought. I could not help

smiling to myself at the absurdity of the fancy which had possessed my mother. It was due to the feeble state of her health at the time, I had no doubt, and to the hallucinations which such a state engendered in one who was by nature highly strung and sensitive to a degree. Later on, when calm reflection had succeeded to the mental perturbation incidental to such an unlooked for revelation, I was able to recall many little incidents of my early childhood which all seemed to point in the same direction.

One thing especially struck me as rather singular, and I recall it now as it seems to offer an explanation for much that happened afterwards. I must have been five or six years of age at the time, as far as I can recollect, for, I remember I was holding my mother's hand as we walked along the road on our way to the Club where mother and father were wont to go of an evening when they were stationed at A——. On this particular evening we were proceeding along the road when a Hindu Yogi who was coming from the opposite direction suddenly stood stock still and stared in our direction. As we came into line with him he crossed the road and addressing my mother said: "Ram—Ram, memsahib!" My mother stopped and as her eyes encountered those of the Yogi she turned ashy pale.

The man, however, was perfectly respectful.

"Baba acha hai?" (Is the child well?) he asked, addressing himself not unkindly to me as he held my chin between the fingers of his right hand.

"Ha!" I replied with all the assurance of youth, for like most European children brought up in the East I had acquired the local vernacular long before I had learned to articulate the intricacies of my mother tongue.

"Kali Mata Ki Jai!" he exclaimed. (Victory to mother Kali) and passed on droning to himself words that as far as my childish memory serves to recall them were something after this fashion: "Ram-Ram Seeta-Ram!"

The man was dressed like most wandering mendicants in India, that is to say he wore a single ochre stained loin cloth, one end of which was thrown over his breast and across the left shoulder. His body and face were ash smeared, while his head was crowned with a thick tangle of hair which had been twisted into a knot on the top. In his left hand he carried the half of a dried gourd that served as a beggar's bowl, under the same arm a pair of tongs, and on his back a small bundle. Recollection retains a vivid impression of a head piled high with long, matted hair, and finger-nails that were already exhibiting the curious whorls of undue growth.

If he was the priest of the temple of Mahadeo of whom my mother had spoken he must have given up his ministry some time previously and taken to the life of a wandering mendicant.

I am inclined to think it was the same man because when we returned home that evening my mother and Seeta the ayah held a whispered consultation in the bedroom, after which Seeta came to where I was playing and looked into my face with anxious concern.

Ever after that I was kept almost constantly in sight either by my mother or the ayah, a restraint on my personal liberty which, boy-like, I resented very keenly. I had hitherto attributed this ceaseless watch and ward to the fact that I was an only child, on whom the loving care and solicitude of a pair of doting parents was being squandered, but I am inclined now to think there were other reasons for it, and that my mother knew what those reasons were, though she chose to keep her lips sealed on the subject even to my father.

There was a note of keen anxiety in his inquiries very often after this, from which I am led to infer that my mother's health had begun to wane, for he frequently made reference to it and suggested a trip to England; to all of which however, my mother would not consent. Months must have dragged on thus, though in my youthful estimate of the lapse of time it seemed but as yesterday is to today.

At last there came a day however, when the matter could no longer be put off. I was growing a big boy and must in the natural course of development outgrow the control of a mother whose loving care had heretofore been exercised with the gentleness of a gossamer thread. I must have become a somewhat intractable little urchin, spoiled by the kindness of too indulgent parents and rapidly outgrowing the lax discipline of a none too severe home life. My mother I know, tried her hardest to teach me the rudiments of the three R's, but I doubt if I learned very much at this time. I certainly could read and write a little, but when it came to figures the whole irksomeness of the task seemed to concentrate in the effort at mastery and I began to develope childish headaches as the safest device for escaping the infliction of these exercises. I knew from experience that mother would kiss my forehead and eyes, as the seats of the pain, and put me to bed whenever one of these ailments arose; so it is only natural to suppose that I became peculiarly addicted to headaches and their recurrence grew in number as I grew in years. Artful little dodger, that I was, with my full share of original sin thus early manifesting itself.

My father somehow seemed the first to get tired of the headache business, for he threatened once or twice to apply the flat of the ivory paper-knife to the palms of my hands, though he never actually put the threat into execution. Perhaps he recognised how great a part heredity plays in all the affairs of life, and in headaches at lesson-time, he saw transmitted the accumulated instinct of generations of ancestors whereby escape was secured from the penalties of an iron discipline. Whatever may have been his views on the subject, he certainly, to my thinking, applied the remedy best suited to the cure of the disease, and thereby showed that his ancestors had also something to transmit in the way of knowledge distilled from practical experience. He decided that it was quite time I was put to school, and into a public school in England I accordingly went, my mother accompanying me home. That was the last I ever saw of my father, as within a few years before I even completed my school course, news came that he was dead, killed I believe, by a tiger.

CHAPTER IV

SEVEN weeks from the time I had the foregoing conversation with her, my dear mother passed out of her earthly troubles to the peace that endureth for ever, and I was free once more to resume my normal life. It seemed to me that she had been calmer though more subdued in spirit, after she had spoken to me, and that the restlessness which had marked her disposition had gradually given place to a sort of coma which ended in death. When I had settled her affairs my wife and I arranged for our return to India by the first available boat, and within a week we had started on our voyage to the sunny East.

On board we made the acquaintance of a young Indian of whom I had heard several times while in India though it had never been my good fortune hitherto to come into personal contact with him. Mahadeo Narayan Bodh belonged to the same service as myself, of which he was a junior member by a couple of years. He had entered the service with high credentials, having passed first on the list a long way ahead of the next highest; and his work had already been well spoken of by men who had grown grey in the service of the Crown. We made an agreeable party on board, Hetty, Bodh, and myself, and managed to keep more or less to ourselves during greater part of the voyage. Bodh, was a quiet, respectable young fellow with none of the boisterous gaiety of the average Briton. He was a Brahmin by caste, but the enlightenment of the West, as we are pleased to term everything pertaining to European ways and manners, had helped to temper the asperities of Eastern observances though they had not in the least changed his religious views. Outwardly he had conformed to European customs, he spoke enthusiastically of the pleasant times he had spent in England, of the many kind friends he had left behind him there, and of the hope he cherished of one day returning and settling down

in the land of his adoption. It was quite evident that he admired our ways and manners, though as far as my observation went, Christianity made no appeal to his inner consciousness. He was still a Hindu, and his invocations in moments of abstraction and when unconscious of his surroundings were always addressed to Mahadeo (Shiva), Rama, and other deities of the Hindu pantheon. Indeed, it would have been surprising had it been otherwise, for a man does not easily change the tenets of the religion in which he has been educated in youth.

Bodh was in many ways typical of the average Hindu young man of the present day. His father had been a Civil Court Judge in Government employ, drawing a salary of between £50 and £60 a month on which he had provided for a household of several dependants among whom our acquaintance was an only son. It is one of the standing orders of the Government of India that no employee holding a position of any responsibility is to be permitted to remain longer than three years in a station, for the very good reason that when a man has mounted the ladder of success in India he usually endeavours to make his relations share in his good fortune at the expense of the public service. Hence to avoid the inevitable interruptions to his studies which such a series of transfers must entail, young Bodh was left with an uncle and aunt in one of the principal towns of the district where he was born, an arrangement which enabled him to pursue his studies in peace until he had arrived at his college career. As the only son of the family, his career had been mapped out for him by his father with extreme care and was prepared for accordingly. After a school career in India Mahadeo was sent to Oxford for his degree, and as all his studies had been directed towards the single end of preparing the young man for the Civil Service examination, the process of assimilation had been well maintained and the finished product compared very favourably with the finished products of the best of our English schools.

Such was Mahadeo Narayan Bodh B.A. (Oxon), I.C.S., Assistant Collector at Aytikari, when my wife and myself came to be acquainted with him.

"Well, Bodh," I said one day when we were having our usual promenade on deck, "have you decided on the line you mean to take up? Will it be the judicial or the revenue?"

"I think I'll go in for the judicial," said Bodh quietly. "My father was in the judicial service; an uncle of mine is also a judge on the civil side, and I myself am by temperament and inclination more fitted for the judicial than executive branch. It's in the blood, as you see," he perpendeed with a laugh.

"Quite the other way with me, I assure you," said I. "Judicial proceedings always bore me and I try to avoid them whenever I can. They tie one down to one's desk in so irritating a fashion, you know, just when you want a day off, that it becomes positively aggravating at times. My inclinations tend towards the open air," and I waved my hand oceanwards as I spoke.

"It is good we are not all born with the same temperaments," said Bodh, "else there would be a curious clogging in what the world calls progress. Now I have never had much inclination for violent exercise. Even as a lad I preferred my books to cricket or tennis. I have been a looker-on, a dreamer, in most things. Life does not appeal to me in the same way that it appeals to most young people."

"What do you do when you are at home in the districts?" I asked, curious to know how a man with such few distractions in life filled in his spare hours.

"I go out occasionally of an evening for tennis to the district engineer's bungalow, where the District Superintendent of Police and his wife, a few railway officials and others congregate. We have a pleasant enough time on those occasions."

"And when there is no tennis?"

"O, then I sometimes go for a long ramble in the country, or else read the papers, or just walk about and think" said Bodh somewhat sheepishly as I thought.

"Time must hang pretty heavily on your hands when you've nothing to do, eh?" I inquired.

"Well, not as a rule," he replied. "I generally contrive to have something to do, and when there is nothing particular to do or to read there are always things one can think about." He laughed in a half apologetic fashion as he said this, as if thinking one's own thoughts was a kind of mental depravity that needed the palliation of an excuse.

"Are you not married?" I pursued as I warmed to my curious companion. "In work such as ours it is always best that a man should have a wife."

"I know that," said Bodh, "but where a man has had to break through the immemorial customs of his ancestors in obeying the strict letter of the regulations against marriage, it is hardly fair to expect him to curtail his liberty at once. Marriage in my case is now quite as difficult a matter as it is in that of the majority of educated Europeans, with this difference that whereas they have always a wide field of selection open to them, with me and men similarly circumstanced the selective area is dangerously narrow."

"I can well understand your position," I remarked. "What you require is a woman who will fit in with your new sphere in life—a companionable woman and at the same time one who will be able to fill the social position that will be yours throughout life."

"Just so," said the young man buoyantly. "I have frequently thought out the subject, but always with the same result: I have finished at the point from which I started, with no prospect of getting any further."

"You will succeed in time, I have no doubt," said I with cheery optimism. "There is always a second half to the divided apple of creation, and the two are bound to come together some day, provided the quest is pursued with equal diligence on both sides."

Bohd laughed a soft, happy laugh. The idea of the unknown woman and himself working towards one another in some mysterious manner seemed quietly picturesque but yet I think it appealed to him. There is a streak of superstition in most of your silent thinkers which tends towards mysticism, and Bohd, to my thinking, was an Eastern mystic with the usual leaning towards fatalism. Hence he accepted the idea of an inscrutable destiny working in his behalf as if it were an actual, tangible thing of everyday life, whereof the accidents and trivialities were nothing but outward manifestations. And who shall say that he was wrong, or that he failed to give individuality its due share in the accomplishment of things when he thus circumscribed its action by ascribing to it the limitations imposed by fate?

As for myself, I gave fate no more credit for working out these things than for anything else. The whole success of failure of the marriage scheme was to my thinking just a matter of correct discernment of dispositions by the contracting parties, with a readiness to make allowances for shortcomings, that might compensate for mistakes and miscalculations. It was all a question of keeping animal instincts under control so that they did not weigh too heavily in the scale; for the rest nature might be left to take care of herself. Bohd would marry in time, I felt sure; most of your quiet men do, sooner or later. Fate would thus as usual have him as an accessory before the fact, and that part—least of my prophecy would be fulfilled which ascribed a limited share to him.

We whiled away the tedium of life on board ship with games and other forms of amusement. Bohd and my wife Hetty sometimes played dominoes; at others we tried cards when we had inveigled one or other of the lady passengers into trying a hand at bridge.

It was on one of these occasions, I recollect that I mentioned the fact of my mother's curious presentiments to Bodh. We had finished playing and were whiling away an hour before retiring for the night. I do not know what induced me to refer to the subject : I suppose I had had a glass too much. Any way I had launched into the subject of the vow before I really knew what I was saying ; and once started, such a discussion as you may well believe soon gathered force and animation.

"Well," said I to Bodh at last after I had given him the story, "what do you think of my mother's position in the matter ?"

"That depends a good deal on the surrounding circumstances," said Bodh, much to my surprise. "You say your mother was childless at the time and that she was induced by her ayah to make the offerings at the shrine in order to obtain the gift of maternity ? It is clear, therefore, that there was an intention on her part to profit, if possible, by the transaction. The extent of her commitment would depend in that case on the extent of her previous knowledge about what actually happened in these cases where women had their wishes fulfilled ? Do you think your mother knew at the time that it was customary for women to whom the boon of maternity had been granted to devote their first born sons to the service of the god Mahadeo ?"

"I cannot say," I replied, "she may have been aware of the fact at the time."

"If she was aware of it," continued Bodh, "then we must assume that she was not unwilling to accept the obligation which the knowledge implied. She cannot plead that she made no vow herself because we must assume that if there had been a mental reservation as regards non-fulfilment at the time, the boon prayed for would not have been granted. That it was granted shows that no mental reservation existed."

"But we are Christians," I remarked, nettled by Bodh's casuistry. "You surely do not expect Christians to accept the doctrines and obligations of Hinduism ?"

"In the divine presence," said Bodh solemnly with a deprecating wave of the hand, "there are no Hindus, Christians, Mahomedans, or other sects. We are just weak creatures crying aloud to the Most High for His merciful assistance ; and if, at the time of prayer, we make certain promises, the obligation rests on us to see that those vows are fulfilled."

"I join issue with you there," said I somewhat heatedly. "It was the priest of the temple who said to my mother, (as I have the story from her own lips)——"Mother Kali

demands of thee thy first born male child as her sacrifice : see that thou fulfil her injunction."

"Quite true," was Bodh's quiet answer. "The injunction was laid on your mother, and she never disputed it."

"But I am obliged to fulfil a vow regarding which I was not consulted ? especially as it concerns my most precious possession—my life ? Is a child obliged to carry out the wishes of a parent when they are diametrically opposed to his own interests ?"

"These are questions we had better leave to metaphysicians to solve," said the young man averting his head, "because the answers are never likely to be the same in each instance. I know, however, what I should do in your place if I were you."

"And what is that ?" I asked without pausing to reflect what the reply might be.

"I should fulfil my mother's vow," said Bodh looking round at me with him arms folded on his breast.

The answer fairly staggered me, though a moment's reflection might have told me that I could expect nothing less from one whose whole life and associations, from childhood upward, had been bound up in the ceremonies and observances of a creed that makes propitiation its primary obligation.

"I'm damned if I do," said I with the irreverent bravado of semi-intoxication.

Bodh looked at me a moment, then at my wife, then away out to the stars plainly visible through the porthole. I have often since wondered what he was thinking about at the time.

My wife, I could see, was plainly puzzled, and so, too, was Miss Westerley the young lady whom we had persuaded to form the fourth at our bridge party.

Recollecting myself in a moment, however, I apologised for my behaviour, and then, asking to be excused, I left them somewhat abruptly and went out into the fresh air of the upper deck to calm my nerves with a little reflection.

When I returned to the saloon a quarter of an hour later the party had broken up, my wife had retired to her cabin, and Bodh and Miss Westerley appeared to have gone away too.

I never again had a chance of renewing the discussion with Bodh, for though we were on our old friendly footing again next morning, we made port that afternoon and had in consequence to part. Bodh promised to give us a look up if ever he found himself in our district and with that we went our several ways, to meet again under rather unusual circumstances some time later as the sequel will show.

CHAPTER V

LIFE in India is pretty much the same in most stations, with this difference, that we find it eddying about a few or many persons according to the strength of the European population. Thus at Beldia, which was the headquarters of my district, my wife and I were naturally the leading personages of the place, with a small circle of official subordinates and their wives as our more immediate entourage. It is not a little gratifying to one's vanity to be thus looked up to, even in small things ; and I know numbers of men in our service who would sooner spend the bulk of their time in out of the way districts than court the inconvenience and elimination consequent on a transfer to a provincial capital.

Beldia is a railway junction, with a rather cosmopolitan population. In the social order of things, as I have already remarked, the district officer and the assistants come first with railway officers and Government employees forming the major portion of office life, in a gradually descending scale that is regulated by the amount of a man's monthly salary. Of military officers we have none nearer than ten miles at Somma where a regiment of native cavalry and another of infantry strive to rival and outshine the gay doings of Beldia. At certain seasons of the year, notably at Easter and Christmas, the ladies of Beldia, headed of course by my wife, make it a point of duty to invite these officers to our station, by way of providing the Somma garrison with some diversion, as they put it. As a dance at the railway institute then usually forms the chief item in our seasonal festivities, I shrewdly suspect that the invitation to the Somma folk has more to do with securing a fresh batch of dancing partners than with any desire to vary the monotony of garrison life in our neighbourhood. However, I do not wish to find fault with the arrangement, especially as it provides us with a new excitement that takes up a fortnight or three weeks of

feverish preparation and leaves behind it a week or more of pleasant memories. A man cannot be always dancing with his wife any more than wife can be with her husband. We are apt to become critical of one another's Terpsichorean abilities with the lapse of time and an increase of knowledge, and so a change seems advisable. It does not detract from domestic felicity, then, to hear your wife say that Captain Bright Rowells dances divinely—which by comparison with your own increasing weight and girth he ought to do—because you have been thinking similar traitorous thoughts yourself about fairy Miss Petticoats with whom you have perhaps spent the greater part of the evening. Hence, these diversions have their uses.

Still, I cannot help reflecting that dancing must have been invented by the Evil One as the easiest and most decisive way of producing domestic infelicity in the households of otherwise sanely mated couples. There is no need for me to elaborate the point for there is hardly a married household, I should say, where bickerings, if not worse, are not the usual concomitants of a night spent at a ball.

The Beldia ball, on the occasion of which I am treating, was to be a fancy dress affair, got up on a specially liberal scale. I know what Hetty means when she talks about "a specially liberal scale" and I daresay my forebodings as to the state of the family exchequer at the end of the month were shared by more than one of the hard-working men who found in Beldia a temporary home. However, it is never any good repining, so when Hetty told me of the momentous decision arrived at by the matrons of the station I repressed the sarcastic comment which rose instantly to my lips and asked as sweetly as I could when the great event was to take place.

"On Easter Monday, of course," said Hetty instantly bubbling over with pleasurable anticipation.

"Easter Monday!" I cried; "and next day a work day! Why didn't you select Easter Sunday while you were about it, or Holy Saturday? That would leave us at least the next day free to get over the effects of the disturbance and sleep off our headaches." I always said something like this to vex Hetty.

"There will be no need to sleep off headaches next day if you drink less on these occasions," said Hetty severely.

"It is the only chance I get of drinking at other people's expense," I replied slyly, "so why should I not make the most of my opportunities?"

But Hetty failed to appreciate the joke : women so seldom do look at these things quite as men do.

" You should not ; that is all," she repeated with decision. " And as for a holiday next day, you know quite well you can always give yourself one. So that's all rubbish."

" Well—well," I cried meekly, " so it's to be on Easter Monday, is it ? I suppose I'll have to put up with it. By the by, Hetty, I hope you won't forget to include the Westerleys in your list of guests."

" Colonel, Mrs., and Miss Westerley will be invited as usual," said my wife with frigid incision, " and I hope you'll enjoy yourself quite as much as you did last time."

" That was a particularly nice little affair, that last one of yours, eh ? " said I, recalling the rollicking evening's fun I had had, with Kate Westerley, and my wife's furious jealousy afterwards.

" I suppose you will go in your old costume as a Chinese Mandarin ? " Hetty asked icily by way of fencing my own question.

" It will be less expensive than making up a new one," said I deprecatingly. " Besides, who cares what I go as—an old—married man like me ? "

" And Kate Westerley will come again as Zingara ? " queried Hetty with a sudden flash in her fine eyes.

" Kate Westerley," said I with the air and tone of a man who was hearing the name for the first time, " I daresay she will please herself what she goes as ; she has a father to pay for her costumes."

The tone and gesture, if they did not convince Hetty, at all events had a mollifying effect on her rising temper, because she presently observed : " Captain Savage tells me he intends coming as a Pierrot."

" Indeed ! " I observed taken quite off my guard ; " Have you met him lately ? "

" Yes," said Hetty ; " I saw him yesterday at the railway station."

Now if there is one man more than another that I have a sincere detestation for, that man is Captain Savage ; and I think Hetty has guessed the state of my feelings towards him pretty accurately. It was the presence of the said Captain Savage at our last fancy dress dance that led me to pay more attention to Kate Westerley than I ordinarily would have done ; it was his attention to Hetty that made me imbibe more champagne in one night than I usually absorb in the course of a six-month ; and it has been my wife's continued,

and as I think, inexplicable friendship for this man that has made me apprehensive of those little social amenities that formerly were so pleasant a feature of our communal life. Captain Savage indeed!—an oily, squirming beast, is how I secretly regard him; how a woman of Hetty's refined sentiments can find pleasure in the coarse inanities of such a creature passes my understanding. And yet she does, more's the pity; and what is further to the purpose she seems to take a delight in making me conscious of her leanings.

You can imagine, therefore, my feelings when I learned, now for the first time that my wife had met this man at the railway station only so recently as yesterday; met him, as seemed most probable, by appointment.

"You might have asked him to break journey here for a few hours and have dinner with us," I said with an assumption of indifference I was far from feeling.

"He was travelling on duty, he told me," remarked Hetty, "or I should certainly have asked him."

"I am glad to see that you keep in mind your reputation for hospitality," I said as pleasantly as I could.

Hetty affected not to notice the implied sarcasm in my tone, but countered most effectively as I thought by observing: "Mrs. Dulwith tells me he is awfully gone on Kate Westerley and that they are likely to make a match of it."

"Ah!" I exclaimed with more animation than I had yet shown. "He's gone on Miss Westerley did you say?"

"So Mrs. Dulwith says," observed Hetty "but as you know she is the most inveterate gossip they have in the regiment."

"Perhaps she is right for once," I said taking the part of the detestable Mrs. Dulwith with a readiness which I should never have thought possible even a few moments before. "Perhaps he has fallen in love with her; she's not a bad sort, you know."

My wife sniffed, ever so lightly.

"Perhaps she has," she said in acidulated accents.

"Just so; one can never tell, you know," I went on to remark. "It is so easy to flatter the vanity of a man by falling in love with him. They may really make a match of it."

"Time enough to speculate when the wedding cards are out," said Hetty reaching out for a book. She was nettled at the thought, I verily believe; while I—I felt a sort of vindictive triumph. Here was a quite unlooked for opportunity of paying Savage back in his own coin. I would make furious love to Kate Westerley at the coming fancy

dress dance ; on that I made up my mind there and then. It would be a salutary reminder to the gentle Savage that two can play the same game. What cared I now if Hetty had met the beast by appointment ? Wasn't I going to meet Kate Westerley by design ? It was a case of diamond cut diamond, with the odds, as I thought, in my favour.

"Mrs. Dulwith has taken her little girl to the hills for the summer," Hetty presently resumed by way of breaking the silence that had momentarily supervened.

"Has she ?" I inquired in some surprise, "how do you know ?"

"She was in the same train with Captain Savage. She wrote and told Mrs. Pollock that she was to pass through Beldia on Wednesday ; so I accompanied Mrs. Pollock to the station to see her."

"Ha !" said I relieved at the thought that Hetty and Savage had not met by appointment ; "is the little girl ill ?"

"Not that I could see ; she seemed right enough to me," Hetty replied, "but one excuse is as good as another for those who want a holiday in the hills."

"So I fancy at times," I sighed with the resignation of one who had never made an excuse in his life.

"But that was not what I was going to say," said Hetty as though she had momentarily forgotten the object of her mission. "About this ball—I shall need a new dress, you know."

"Won't the old one, called by a new name, serve ?" I inquired in what my wife always calls my worst Scotch bawbee manner.

"Dennis, how can you suggest such a thing," exclaimed Hetty in her most dramatic manner, "the idea ! And you the Collector of the district ! What will people say if they see me in my old dress again ? They are sure to whisper to each other : 'There goes poor Mrs. Claire with her last year's dress on and that skinflint husband of hers dressed again as a Chinese Mandarin.'"

"Ugh !" said I involuntarily ; "I was only suggesting a possibility, not laying down a definite course of action ; but since you dislike the idea, there's an end of it, of course. We'll both have new costumes and so prevent the chance of any gossip. Let me hear what your costume is to be."

"There is no occasion to have two new costumes," said Hetty with decision. "You can go as a Chinese Mandarin, Dennis, you look so well as one. But in my case, really, you

know, it would be positively scandalous if I went as Kate Greenaway a second time."

"I suppose so," said I hastily. "I had never looked at it in that light before. Yes, indeed, now that I think of it; some of the neighbours may recognize the hat as the one you wear when you go over to the stables of a morning."

Hetty laughed, which was a good sign. "Yes," she proceeded—cheerily. "You see I didn't throw the old thing away. I just took off the plume, put a blue ribbon in its place, and kept it for sun wear. I am not so very extravagant after all, am I?"

"You never were," said I going up and giving her a good hug and a kiss. "I never suggested such a thing."—Whereat, and at the little display of affectionate regard on my part Hetty laughed once more cheerily in her old free-heartedness. "And now," I resumed, marching up to my writing-desk : "how much shall I make it out for?"

The instant Hetty discovered my intention she flew after me and slipped her hand round my neck.

"You are a dear," she gurgled as she nestled her cheek against mine. "I knew you would never refuse me anything."

"Have I ever?" I asked patting her cheek affectionately.

"No," said Hetty diplomatically, thinking it safer, no doubt, to assent to every proposition rather than risk the delay which a discussion must surely entail.

"How much?" I asked again dipping the pen into the ink.

"Let me see," said Hetty suddenly seizing a pencil and scratching certain hieroglyphics on the corner of the blotting pad.

"Shall I make it three hundred?" I asked sweetly.

"Wait," cried Hetty in an agony of apprehension at the bare thought that it would be only Rs. 300. "There's my costume, then there is our subscription to the ball and something for extras."

"Three hundred and fifty, shall I say?"

"My costume may be a little expensive, you know," Hetty went on as if ruminating to herself. "Then we shall have to subscribe liberally to the ball-fund—one hundred at least will have to go there—."

"I'll make it four hundred," I said taking a fresh supply of ink and decorating the cheque with a spot as the result.

"Oh!—and the extras! I had nearly forgotten the extras," cried Hetty as if she had only that moment re-collected their importance.

"Well?" I cried in a tone that I thought might help to clinch matters.

"Say four hundred and fifty, do?" Hetty insinuated. "That will cover the extras."

I hastily wrote in the figures on the cheque so that Hetty might not have occasion to change her mind, and then filled in the rest of the details. Then I handed the cheque to Hetty who examined it critically as if she were trying to think of some excuse for having the figures altered. She was seemingly unsuccessful in her endeavour because she presently stooped and imprinting a light kiss on my forehead went away whistling and waving the cheque in her hand.

It was worth the money, pleasing my dear wife, I reflected.

CHAPTER VI

WE were a pleasant little party at Beldia that Easter. My wife had asked Mr. and Mrs. Towner to stay with us over the week-end, and they had come in on Good Friday and were to stay till the Tuesday evening following. Towner was my junior by many years, a good enough chap in his way, but inclined to be somewhat boastful of his achievements ; his wife, a warm-hearted creature with a genius for cookery, had by the exercise of her art, I think, succeeded in captivating the egoistic affections of the errant Towner. Whatever mutual attraction they may have had for one another it certainly seemed to me that Towner could not have made a better choice while he was about it. Mrs. Towner knew the country and its people thoroughly. Her father was in the police—a man who had made his way up from the very bottom of the ladder—and though he may not have possessed what you would call table manners he had seen to it that his two daughters, Rachel and Maud had whatever in the way of education was procurable in the country under the sisters of Wantage. Being the elder of the two girls Rachel had naturally been called upon oftener to play her part in helping her mother with the household arrangements than had Maud ; the consequence was that while the former acquired much of her mother's taste in turning out dainty morsels that appealed to appetites jaded by too great an indulgence in country cookery, Maud seldom or never rose above the luxury of a seed cake.

I think it was this special gift of Rachel Towner's that also appealed to my wife ; because seldom a day passed while the Towners were in our house that did not see something new and appetising among the courses we had for dinner, and as these new dishes kept reappearing at regular intervals for some time after the visit had ended I knew by experience that Hetty had been diligently acquiring the culinary lore of

her guest during her stay. Thus the secret of the cooking-stove which an ignorant coolie had one day carried to my office in place of bringing it on to the bungalow—as Hetty had intended,—had been revealed to me; though I kept the knowledge to myself for some time.

Rachel Towner at this time must have been between 30 and 35 years of age, a splendid specimen of a woman with jet black hair inclined to be a bit wavy at the sides, a creamy white complexion and a bust that greatly enhanced her beauty. It was easy to see that she was proud of her husband, and, no doubt, in a way proud of herself for having captured him; but for the rest she was simple and natural in her manners, with a frank generous disposition hidden under a natural reserve that might have been mistaken for pride but was not. There was one child of the marriage, a little girl, who was almost the picture of her mother, and of whom her parents were dotingly fond. Cissy Towner was a general favourite with those who knew her and a particular one of my wife whom she called Mrs. Cla-aire, with so sweet a wisp, that quite took Hetty's heart by storm. Mrs. Cla-aire was never tired of petting Cissy, and if you ask me, I think the maternal instinct that lies at the bottom of most women's natures was appealed to in a special way by the soft touch of those baby fingers.

Such were our guests on this memorable occasion, and, as I previously remarked, we made a pleasant little party. Colonel, Mrs. and Miss Westerley had also come in to Beldia for the dance and were putting up with the district engineer, while numerous tents in the compounds of bungalows showed how the officers of the Somma Garrison were being accommodated for the same great occasion.

And here we were, now assembling at last in the drawing-room before starting out for the scene of the night's revelry. What hearty laughter greeted each fresh appearance!

I was the first to enter the drawing-room, where Towner presently joined me. To say that my appearance at once sent him into a roar and that I was equally tickled at seeing him turned out as a Robber Captain, is but to repeat the obvious. Friends are as heartily pleased at observing each other's vagaries on such occasions as are absolute strangers, and the light banter that passes current is as pleasant to hear as more sober compliments are at other times.

We were presently joined by Mrs. Towner, who as a Dutch country maid could hardly, I thought, have chosen a costume more in keeping with her plump smiling face than the one

she had selected ; and while we were laughing and talking Hetty slipped into the room looking as bonnie a Highland Lassie as any you could wish to set eyes on outside of Scotland. I felt distinctly proud of my wife that night, I can tell you, and I know by the way Mr. and Mrs. Towner glanced up at me that they shared my admiration and were obviously relieved to see that I was impressed.

Just before we started off little Cissy Towner burst into the room in her flannel night suit and insisted on saying "Good night, Mrs. Cla-aire." She held my wife's face between both her tiny palms as she kissed her, and I feel sure there was all the warmth of a mother's embrace in the way Hetty bade our little guest "Good night."

Then we went out into the moonlit night, the four of us, guided by a servant carrying a lantern. Roads are narrow and carriages an unnecessary luxury in these country settlements where everything and everybody is almost to be found at one's doors, so it was not surprising that we should pick up several parties similarly bound as we proceeded.

I think I have remarked already that the dances at Beldia were held at the railway institute. This is not strictly accurate, as the "institute" is a building set apart only as a library and reading room, with a billiard-room and bar downstairs. When touring theatrical companies visit Beldia they are accorded the privilege of using the institute stage on paying for it; and our amateur performers likewise occasionally disport themselves on the stage, though without having to pay for the privilege. Our dances, however, are carried on in a circular pavilion specially built for the purpose in one part of the institute grounds and generally included in the term Institute. This arrangement has many advantages, especially during the hot weather when dancing indoors becomes most trying. The pavilion being of lattice-work, without a roof over the central portion, is cooler by many degrees than an enclosed room would be in similar circumstances, though, *per contra*, its use becomes impossible during the rains.

There was a fairly numerous gathering already at the pavilion when we arrived, but it was easy to see from the various groups standing about that dancing had not yet started. That the ladies of Beldia had put forth their best effort to make the affair a success was apparent from the minute preparations noticeable on every side, even down to the cosy corners scattered about the lawn and grounds.

The Westerleys were grouped not far from the entrance with their friends, the Petters, when we reached the place, and at once acknowledged our presence by coming up and

speaking to us. Colonel Westerley, as became an officer of his standing, wore the uniform of his regiment; Mrs. Westerley came *poudre*; but what shall I say of Kate Westerley, who in the national costume of the women of India, made a most startling, bewitching, Hindu goddess? What particular deity she chose to represent I did not for some time discover; all I know is that no finer specimen of Hindu womanhood could have been found just then had one searched the land from the Cape to the Himalayas and devoted a month of Sundays to the task. I have in my mind's eye a picture of the goddess Parvati that, I think, comes as near as anything I know to what Kate Westerley looked like that night. The details may naturally have varied in certain particulars but she was true to principle in the main outlines, and the conception was bold, and, as I have said, startlingly original.

She was dressed in a gay silk saree heavily embroidered with gold on the borders; her jacket low necked and practically open in front,—was of some light blue material, perhaps satin, with a fringe of hand-painted roses all along the edges; in her nose she wore a gold nose-ring from which clusters of brilliants sparkled and scintillated, while in front of her ears and on her forehead danced bunches of pearls that swayed gracefully with every motion of her body. How she managed to keep all these ornaments, as well as the double necklace of gold coins, on her person without losing any of them while dancing has always been a mystery to me; but that she did so and enjoyed herself at one and the same time, I am ready to vouch for, since I had personal proof of it during the evening. What puzzled me then, however, and has remained an unsolved problem still is the marvellous tint she managed to give her complexion, changing the colour of her skin from a milky white to a light rich amber, glowing with health and vitality, as it seemed. Her hair too, had for the nonce changed its hue, in keeping with the character she represented; and was now a glossy black, whereas formerly it had been a light brown tending to blonde. Her lips were a glowing vermillion, well in keeping with the rest of her complexion, while the caste mark on her forehead and the spot of indigo blue in the centre of her chin made of Kate Westerley a type of beauty peculiar to the warm climate and glowing sensuousness of the East.

The effect of her appearance was instantaneous and telling both on Hetty and Rachel Towner, though it affected them in different ways. To my friend's wife Kate Westerley appeared as a most beautiful girl, got up in a costume that suited her to perfection and set off her fine figure to the

fullest advantage. She never for a moment stopped to reflect what the effect might be on her young husband of holding so much sinuous voluptuousness in his arms and pressed to his bosom while dancing. She was so sure of Towner that she never gave a thought to any possibility of ill resulting from the contact of the two ; whereas with Hetty it was different. There was an ominous glint in Hetty's eyes the instant she caught sight of Kate Westerley, and though she was not overtly hostile, the greeting between the two, I could see, lacked cordiality and my wife seized the first opportunity that offered to drift away to more congenial company.

We were all of us soon as busy as we could well be—busy in the sense that we had something to do. The music struck up, and away whirled the couples young and old, happy to forget whatever troubles life may have had for them, happy to submerge self for a few brief hours in the pool of forgetfulness. Blessed nepenthe, god created of old for man's regeneration, how often, alas ! does surfeit lead but to other ills—ills for which there is no anodyne except the repentance that is born of experience.

I have often since that day debated in my own mind whether a man who recognizes the danger his wife runs from contact with certain influences is justified in taking steps to counteract them. Youthful folly only too frequently leads to trouble which an early removal of the cause may, and often does, effectually cure. In such cases the result achieved may justly be quoted in favour of early and tactful management, though it is a moot question whether the recognition by one or other of the parties involved of the dangers ahead and the insincerity lying dormant behind are not the most fruitful factors in bringing about the change most desirable. For my own part, by temperament and disposition I have been averse to interference. Mine has been one of those natures which takes refuge in pride, wraps itself up in the cloak of its own self-conceit, and throws on time and change the duty of effecting a deliverance. Vain transitory delusions ! Through pride Lucifer—son of the morning, most lovely of ethereal seraphs—lost his chance of heavenly bliss ; and through pride many a man or woman wrecks what little is his or hers, and wakes too late to find that happiness has, indeed, fled.

"I see you have not danced as yet Mr. Clair," said Kate Westerley coming up to me about the fourth dance, "is it from lack of suitable partners ? "

"No, indeed ; say rather from lack of suitable opportunity, Miss Westerley," said I, smiling at her. "I see you have not been idle yourself."

"Not a moment," said Kate. "I had my duty to perform by our regiment and I have done it, shall I say—manfully?"

"Yes—manfully is the right word," I laughed; "and now having done your duty manfully, by your father's regiment what do you propose doing?"

"I propose enjoying myself a little bit on my own now," said Kate fanning herself.

"May I not contribute to that enjoyment if I can?" I asked still smiling down at her.

"Certainly, if you have a mind to," she replied.

I had caught a glimpse of Hetty in the opposite doorway talking to Captain Savage. They had already had two out of the four dances together, and the devil that lies dormant in all of us prompted me there and then that here was my opportunity of getting even with them.

Hetty was watching us very narrowly, I could see, although she pretended to be engaged in conversation, because she had shifted her position ever so slightly but still sufficiently to bring Kate Westerley and myself more directly into the line of her view.

So when the music struck up once more I offered Kate Westerley my arm and we sailed away down the room to one of Linche's most delightful airs. Opposite the spot where Hetty and Captain Savage had been standing I looked to see if they were still there. Alas! they were not. But presently I discovered them dancing not far from ourselves. 'Their third together,' I mentally noted; "I wonder if they are going to make a night of it and give gossip a handle?"

Kate Westerley waltzed divinely, and though I cannot claim to be much of a dancer myself I must have been a poor judge of such performances if I could not appreciate her skill. Her small flexuous figure in the clinging draperies seemed to float at will hither and thither as an act of mere volition rather than in obedience to my directing touch. And then the soft feel of her warm flesh beneath the silken finery! One has to experience the sensation of holding in one's arms so much fascinating voluptuousness to realize what the witchery of the moment is like. I confess that it was not long ere I surrendered my senses to the intoxicating delight of her presence without one thought for the consequences.

We slipped through the maze of dancers with the ease that comes of long practice, and presently after twice or thrice completing the circuit of the hall, found ourselves on the

lawn outside seated in one of the cosy corners specially arranged for the purpose in the fresh open air under the moonlight.

"You seem to have struck a novel idea for your costume," I remarked to my partner when we had made ourselves comfortable.

"Do you think so?" she asked smoothing out the creases in her dress. "I caught the idea from a very handsome Indian lady I saw the other day at a girls' school prize-giving. I thought she looked remarkably fascinating; so I just studied her carefully, and this is the result. Do you think I have hit it off correctly?"

"To the life I should say. The costume is startlingly original," I said smiling.

"You do not mean by that, that there is anything unbecoming in it, I hope?" she asked with the faintest trace of anxiety in her tones.

"Not at all," I hastened to reassure her. "I merely meant to say that nobody else seems to have realized how well an oriental costume looks on the background of a fair pink-tinted skin, such as yours."

"The lady I copied was a beautiful brunette; with large black, eyes, fringed with long lashes," said Miss Westerley reflectively. "It was the contrast of her lovely complexion, set off by her Eastern dress, that so caught on my imagination."

"I can well believe it," I replied; "but how did you manage about your own lovely complexion?" I asked, noting the gently heaving breasts nestling in the soft satin jacket. They were the hue of her face and hands, and the more I saw of them the more I marvelled at the art which had enabled her to change her own lily whiteness for the robuster glow of a light nut-brown.

"That is my secret," she said, following the direction of my eyes and immediately straightening herself, so that the full contour of her round figure, was at once revealed in all its fascinating loveliness. "I had a great deal of trouble in securing the right tint, but I succeeded at last in getting what I wanted."

"By jove, you have made a splendid job of it," said I in genuine admiration.

"Tell me honestly, Mr. Claire, you do not think I outrage the conventions in any way, do I?"

"Not at all," I exclaimed. "Have we not living specimens around us at all times?"

"Yes, but they do not come to dances, as I have done."

"What difference does that make?"

"Every difference in the world. I never realized until I came under the glare of the lamps in the pavilion how—how—(she seemed to hesitate for an appropriate word)—how little I felt," she hazarded.

"It is good to realize one's littleness sometimes," I laughed good humouredly, knowing fully well that that was not what she had meant to say.

"Ah! you can laugh at me; but I assure you, it is no laughing matter, Mr. Claire."

"Indeed, I do not laugh at you, Miss Westerley. I was only amused at your way of expressing yourself."

There was a sudden and almost, I may say, dramatic interruption to our conversation at this stage, for our talk had prevented our hearing footsteps approaching along the gravel path. Before either of us was aware of it, I heard a voice—my wife's voice, too—say in frigid tones: "O the place is occupied!"

I caught a glimpse of her eyes as they rested for a second on Kate Westerley, and then as she turned away I heard Captain Savage laugh.

It was amusing to him, no doubt, to see my wife thus stumble on me unawares in the shrubbery, but, then, were they not themselves seeking a similar retreat at the time?

Kate Westerley herself seemed highly tickled at the interruption, for she did a curious thing: she thrust out her tongue in the singularly Indian way that natives of India have of expressing their sense of the untowardness of things. What made her do it I am sure I cannot say, for in ordinary circumstances you would as soon expect her to thrust her tongue out at you as expressive of surprise as see her skip round and throw her limbs about. The act has always since remained inexplicable to me, and I have frequently pondered the question whether costumes have their influence on national characteristics equally with climate and other environment, for though the habit of putting out one's tongue may in no way be peculiar to any one people, I certainly think that in no country in the world is it so generally expressive of an awkward *contretemps* as it is in India.

Anyway, there was no getting over the fact that Kate Westerley, in the moment of her first surprise, had unintentionally made use of this mode of conveying her sense of the inexpediency of the meeting. Then I remembered what Hetty had said to me about the probability of her being engaged to Captain Savage, and a glow of satisfaction filled

my mind at the recollection that I was now in a fair way of getting some of my own back in the matter of indulgence in the gentle art of flirtation. Was this an indication of spitefulness on my part, or merely the natural tendency towards cynicism which the suppression of the combative instinct in the modern male is gradually giving rise to? I shall not attempt to answer the question, as the disquisition can be neither interesting nor illuminating. All I will venture to say is that both Miss Westerley and I seemed mutually to come to the same resolution about the same time, for we promptly had the next dance together, and the one after that, and thereafter we spent the greater part of the evening in each other's company in one or other of the cosy corners outside.

CHAPTER VII

OUR Easter dance was generally voted a success and the ladies of Beldia were content to rest on their laurels for some considerable time afterwards. The Towners and ourselves reached home about 2 a.m., tired out and ready for a good long sleep. I had had a couple of dances with Hetty during the evening but the majority of the rest, I regret to say, were with Kate Westerley. Whether Hetty favoured Captain Savage to the same extent I am unable to say, but thus much I know, we were an unusually taciturn party on our way home that night, the only one who made an effort to keep alive the conversation in her usual kindly manner being Rachel Towner.

The incidents of that night have been indelibly engraved on my memory by what occurred ere I awoke to the blessed light of another day, and all that transpired subsequently seems but a confirmation of my dreams.

If healthy exercise be a good preparation for a night's rest, long hours spent in dancing have in my case at least certainly not conduced invariably to uninterrupted slumber. We were all in bed and comfortably asleep, I should say, within half an hour of reaching home; all, that is to say, excepting myself who spent a wretched night, what between waking and sleeping—a night made hideous by a horrid dream.

I could not have been asleep very long when I awoke with a start, as though I felt somebody twitch my sleeve and call me by name. I sat up in bed and looked about me in half-conscious dread. The room was in darkness, except for the pale moonlight streaming in through the latticed windows; and no sound, only the stertorous breathing of some heavy sleeper disturbed the stillness of the night. I stepped lightly across to my wife's room, thinking that perhaps Hetty might have called; but apparently I was mistaken

or had only just begun to dream myself, for I saw that Hetty was fast asleep and had probably not moved since she placed her head on her pillow.

I went back to my own couch and must have dropped off again into instant slumber, because almost at once I seemed to be haunted by a spectre that kept hovering round about me all that night.

I dreamed that my duties as a Magistrate took me to a Hindu temple standing in a forest through which flowed a large river. There were hundreds of persons as I could see bathing in the waters of the stream, yet when I entered the temple it seemed strangely silent and deserted, for the sound of my footfall echoed back from the high walls of the surrounding courtyard with a dull hollow thud. Nothing daunted I pursued my way fearlessly into the inner courts until I could hear a voice chanting something in a rich treble that rose and fell in rhythmic cadence. I moved onward towards the sound and presently saw the person from whom the voice emanated. He was a wizen-faced old man, naked to the waist, with a sacred thread, denoting his Brahminical caste, looped across one shoulder. On his forehead, arms, and chest were the markings peculiar to the Hindu priesthood, while the single tuft of grey hair with which the crown of his head was adorned was tied into a knot that swayed backwards and forwards as he rocked to and fro in consonance with his chanting. In front of him, as he sat cross-legged on a drugget, stood a small bookstand of carved sandal wood on which lay a large folio volume of closely written characters; at his right was a brass stand lamp with seven floating wicks which burnt with a soft sputtering scintillation, and at his left a brass tray in which were several betelnut leaves arranged in a circle, smeared with vermilion, with an arecanut in the centre.

A nearer view of the old priest showed me that his throat was smeared with indigo mixed with ashes, whereby I knew him to be a follower of Siva whose pictures always represent the god with a blue stain on his throat, to indicate the deadly poison produced at the churning of the ocean—which Siva is said to have drunk in order to save the world. There were other peculiarities about this old priest, all which, with the strange pervasiveness of the dreamer, I seemed to have noted with most minute exactness, such for instance as the inordinate length of his finger-nails, doubtless in observance of some vow, the obliquity of his vision from long indulgence in *yoga* or meditation, the rotundity of his shoulders as though he passed many hours each day in poring over books, and the weary look in his steel grey eyes, when at

last he turned them on me, that spoke of the yearning after desires never likely to be gratified.

There was no pause in the old man's reading as I approached and stood by him, from which I inferred that he was not unused to these interruptions to his devotions. Presently, however, he looked up and a smile parted his thin lips.

"Ha, Claire Saheb, you have come at last, have you?" he said, with almost a gurgle of joy. "I am so glad. I have waited these many, many years for you, knowing you would come, still doubting at times, you know, as men will doubt, but with hope strong in me. And there now I see you before me. Victory to the Shri!"

"Who told you I was coming here?" I asked with some asperity, for the man's seeming familiarity provoked me.

"Who told me you were coming here?" he repeated with a look of triumph on his wizened features. "Ha, ha; How did I know you would come? Would you have me tell how I learned the secret that one day Claire Saheb would return to do puja to Kali?" He leered at me blear-eyed and rheumy. "Why, Shri herself told me!"

"Who is Shri?" I demanded, still at a loss to account for the man's inexplicable behaviour.

Instead of replying he turned half round towards the sanctuary at the door of which I had found him sitting, raised his joined palms to his forehead in salutation and repeated a *mantra* or prayer in honour of Kali. "Hail, Kali, three-eyed goddess, of horrid form! Behold, thy servant hath come to offer sacrifice before thee! Salutation, Great Mother: Thy humble worshipper salute thee." He made an obeisance before the image; then returned once more to his book. "I will tell you who the great Shri is," he said. "Listen, I will read to you, Claire Saheb." He began to read out of the book before him. "Shri Kali, the Great Mother whom I adore with liquors and thank-offerings of flowers; goddess of the gaping mouth; with eyes red with blood and fire; who has four hands and a splendid garland formed of the heads of the giants she has slain and whose blood she has drunk; who holds a sword in her lotus-like hand; who is fearless, and awards blessings; who is black as the large clouds; who has a throat smeared with blood; who wears earrings consisting of two dead bodies; who carries two dead bodies in her hands; who has terrible teeth and a smiling face; whose form is awful; who dwells in burning grounds, and stands on the breast of her husband, Siva. —Have you heard, Claire Saheb?—That is Shri."

"What have I to do with Shri?" I cried contemptuously.

For a moment he gazed steadily at me with a look of growing horror in his eyes, as though he were trying hard not to believe that his ears had just been assailed by most blasphemous sounds; the next instant he was looking towards the sanctuary and repeating in the old sing-song tones I had heard on first entering the place: 'Hail Devi! Devi! goddess of thunder! iron-sceptred goddess! hail!—Behold I am thy sacrifice, mother. Drink my blood; I will sacrifice to thee if he will not!"

The words died down and silence reigned in the temple; but I continued gazing on the shrivelled up specimen of humanity before me, as with forehead bent over his book he muttered to himself words which to me were unintelligible.

All at once, however, he seemed to grow quite animated.

"I have prayed to Shri daily, as you have seen me do today, for forty years, Claire Saheb, for forty years mark you, and think as you, she will not answer me? Ah!—I have been answered. She has assured me that you would come in time; that you would bring the sacrifice. Where is he?—the boy?"

"What boy?" I asked.

"The boy who is to offer sacrifice to Shri.—Your son. Where is he?"

"I have no son," I replied.

"No son!" he replied. "Surely that is a mistake. Look again; you must have forgotten him."

"I have no son," I asserted doggedly. "I do not make a mistake."

"Devi! Devi! hail mother! he has no son, and he comes," he cried gazing wistfully up at the shrine.

With that he rose to his feet and taking up the brass tray containing the betelnut, I have before mentioned, motioned me to follow him.

He raised his hand and clanged a bell as we entered the sanctuary and the next instant we stood within the portals of the inner shrine in the presence of the most repulsive goddess in the Hindu pantheon.

I knew at once from my mother's description of her visit to the temple of Mahadeo that this must be the image of the dreaded goddess Kali. To me, as I gazed on it on its high pedestal, it seemed to be of gigantic proportions, and the face and dress—strange to relate—were the face and dress of

Kate Westerley as I had seen her at the dance. I felt a great fear grip my heart and beads of icy cold perspiration broke out on my forehead. And then, horror of horrors ! she stuck her tongue out at me just as I had seen Kate Westerley do when my wife discovered us in the *kala jugah*.

"Shri is pleased," I heard the old priest say with a leer as the vision faded from my mind's eye and I sat up in bed once again with a start, fancying as before that someone had twitched me by the sleeve and called me by name.

For the second time that night I walked across to Hetty's room to see if she were awake, and for the second time I found her fast asleep but with a pillow clasped close to her bosom as though it were an infant.

A cock began to crow in our back yard, by which I knew that the witching hours of night had passed ; and he was presently answered by a neighbouring rooster, and yet another. I struck a match and looked at the clock on my dressing-table.

"Half past four !" I said to myself ; "Why, I haven't been in bed more than a couple of hours !"

I shuddered as I got into bed again and drew the bed clothes about me. The recollection of my dream recurred to me the moment my head touched the pillow.

"What a fool I am," I reflected, to be thus scared by the mere phantasy of a disordered stomach. I mustn't drink so much in future when I go to dances. And then to picture Kate Westerley as Kali ! Good gracious, was anything more absurd !"—and I laughed softly to myself notwithstanding the cold shiver that went down my spine at recollection of the shock I had had at the vision.—"I must give up reading books on Hindu Mythology ; they only help to conjure up dreadful visions the moment a man's vitality shows the least sign of flagging," I perpendeed. Then the story my mother told me at the time of her last illness recurred to me, and I found myself wondering vaguely whether it was all true or whether memory was merely recasting in the form of a hideous phantasmagoria the impressions and embrotypes it had garnered during long years of study and reflection. I had no opportunity to pursue the thought further as I fell asleep while thinking and slept soundly till late that morning.

The Towners brought their visit to a close on this day ; so the whole forenoon was taken up with preparations for their coming departure, and though I wished very much to relate the details of my strange dream to Hetty I had perforce to curb my impatience while they were in the house.

After dinner that night, however, we sat out in the garden in the moonlight for an hour before turning in, so I took that opportunity to narrate the dream of the night before.

"Was it not strange that the old priest should inquire if I had brought my son with me?" I asked as casually as I could, to see what impression my narrative had made on Hetty.

She gurgled softly to herself, I thought, ere she replied.

"Perhaps he mistook you for your father; you were to have been the offertory according to your mother's story, remember," she said with a laugh.

"Perhaps it is as you say," I remarked, "still how could he have been waiting only forty years, if it was my father whom he thought he was addressing? Why, I am nearly forty myself."

"I'm sure I cannot tell," said Hetty; "dreams are never very clear as to dates, you know. ——She looked like Kate Westerley, you say?"

"Who?" I asked, forgetting for the nonce that I had mentioned the fact that my dream had given the face and form of Kate Westerley to the image of Kali.

"Who? ——Why the goddess of your dream, of course?" Hetty pursued, with just a suggestion of derision in her tone.

"Yes; was it not curious?" said I, weakly seeking to placate her at the expense of the absent one.

"Curious? —not at all" said Hetty. "It was the most natural thing in the world that you should dream of Kate Westerley after spending most part of the evening with her."

Spoken every whit like a woman, I reflected; but had I retorted with a query whether Hetty herself had not been dreaming about Captain Savage, seeing how she had been occupied, there would have been instant tappage, ending in a fit of the sulks. However, I held my peace.

"What an outrageous costume to come in to a dance!" Hetty pursued presently. "Why, she never even wore corsets; just came as if she had been used to going about like that all her life."

"There is no merit in wearing an Oriental costume unless you go in for the thing thoroughly," I said with a provoking chuckle.

"I suppose not," snapped Hetty. "She ought to have discarded her shoes and stockings, and her flesh coloured tights to have come up to your ideal, eh?"

"O no; I agree with you; a pair of corsets would have been an improvement," I conceded.

Hetty said nothing, though it was evident she was still reflecting on what I had said, for she all at once rose to her feet saying she was tired and would go to bed.

I rose too, and then a sudden impulse seizing me, I slipped my arm round my wife's waist and drawing her face down to my shoulder, kissed her softly on the lips.

"There is no one I love like my Hetty," I whispered as her head lay nestled against my shoulder. "She is worth a hundred Kate Westerleys to me."

"Do you really think so?" Hetty asked, her eyes suddenly afire.

"I'm quite sure of it," I asseverated, at which Hetty laughed softly, kissed me passionately in return and went in.

It was not long after this that I retired myself, closing up the house without disturbing the servants, and stealing noiselessly but happy to my own room.

CHAPTER VIII

WE take count of the flight of time only by its passage. Minutes roll on unheeded ; hours slip away into days ; a week has flown ; then a month, and we wake up at last with a start to find that another year has been added to the long roll which makes up eternity : a year whereof nothing, maybe, remains to us except its memories.

The year was drawing to its close in Beldia and with the near approach of Advent came the season when most district officers tour their charges. It would be my duty, as a matter of course, to repeat my peregrinations of former years ; but I resolved on the present occasion to give one or two of the remoter sections of my charge a look up, instead of leaving them, as I had done hitherto, to the care of my assistants. I was seated in the little room in which I usually transact my official business when at home and was sketching a rough programme of dates to see how they would pan out, when Hetty came into the room, stood behind my chair, and slipped an arm over my shoulder.

The turtle-dove period of married life, let me here observe, had long since passed away in the case of Hetty and myself ; we were a staid couple, given to occasional frivolity perhaps, but not usually demonstrative of our affections in public, or where there might chance to be witnesses. Hence when Hetty's arm slipped gently round my chin and I found myself in danger of premature strangulation if I resisted, I knew there must be some cause for this sudden outcrop of affection.

"What are you writing, Arthur ?" my wife asked, increasing the pressure which was already threatening my neck with dislocation.

Now, I have long since learned to read the signs of the marital barometer pretty accurately, and one of these signs tells me that when Hetty chooses to address me as Arthur

instead of Dennis it implies that I am expected to feel very pleased with what I am about to hear. When, therefore, Arthur was asked what he was writing, it was not Dennis of whom an answer was expected. So I let Arthur reply :—

"I am just arranging my cold weather tour, dearest. Do you wish to come or would you much rather stay here in Beldia ? "

"Of course I shall come," said Hetty decidedly.

"But last year, do you recollect how very knocked up you were feeling, dear ? You had better stay in Beldia if you think the rough life is becoming too much for you."

"Not at all ; besides, I want to be near you Arthur. I—I'm—beginning to feel, a bit nervous, I think, when I'm left alone."

Now this was a most unusual circumstance with my wife. Hetty nervous ! It seemed ridiculous ; and yet it might be that her health was giving way under the strain of living constantly in the plains. So I half turned in my chair, slipped my arm round her waist and relieved the pressure on my throat by taking the obtrusive hand prisoner in my own.

"Feel nervous when you're left alone ? You're not quite up to the mark. I ought to have let you go home last May, eh, sweetheart ?—Well, never mind ; the winter will soon be over and you can have the spring and summer in Surrey."

"I do not want to go away just yet," said Hetty nestling her cheek against mine. "I want to stay near you, Arthur, until—until—it's all past and over."

"Until what's past ?" said I at a loss to account for her behaviour.

"I—I—don't know," was Hetty's vague answer. "I shall have to make a lot of little things, you know : wrappers, napkins, and what not. I had better begin at once, I think."

Then I understood ; and drawing Hetty's face round to my own I kissed her on the lips. The next few minutes went by in silence, Hetty's cheek pressed close against mine and her hand patting my head.

"I must go now, dear, and get along with my work ; I've ever so much to think about ;" and giving me a kiss and caress she went away singing softly to herself.

Whether it had the seeming of an act of fate or not I cannot say, but to me there certainly seemed something uncanny in the fact that Hetty's communication to me that morning should have been followed by the incident I am

about to relate. My wife had hardly left the room when the chaprassi brought me in a piece of paper with the words :

Mahadeo Narayen Bodh, B.A. (Ox.), I.C.S., scribbled across.

"Bodh!" said I to myself, and then I remembered the pleasant young man who had been our fellow-traveller on the voyage out from England, now nearly eighteen months ago ; and the discussions we occasionally had when there was no other way of killing time. This, indeed, promised to be a happy reunion.

I hastened to the door of my office to welcome him ; but imagine the shock I received when instead of the handsome debonair young Brahmin, immaculately dressed after the most approved European fashion, whom I had always associated in my mind with Mahadeo Narayen Bodh, I beheld before me an unkempt ash-smeared ascetic, seated cross-legged on the floor of the verandah, of whom the chaprassi was evidently in mortal dread. He was smiling up at the failure of my first attempt to place him in the catalogue of my acquaintances, smiling in the same quiet way that had been his on board ship during the period of our brief association together.

"Bodh!" I exclaimed when at last I had detected some of these lineaments which had eluded my eager scrutiny under their mask of scoria. "What on earth have you done to yourself, my dear man?"

He laughed a short, dry laugh.

"So you managed to recognize me after all," he said rising to his feet.

"I would not have known it was you had you not sent in your name," I remarked. "But what have you been doing to yourself that you go about in this disguise? Have you taken over the duties of the C.I.D.?"

The idea seemed to tickle Bodh, for he laughed, much in his old manner, though an almost imperceptible sigh escaped him immediately. However, he made no allusion to my remark about the Criminal Investigation Department.

"I wanted a few minutes' private conversation with you," he observed ; "that is, if you do not mind of course,"—he added as an after-thought—. "I was passing your bungalow and saw your name on the board outside. That made me think of what I wanted to say to you."

"Come into the office," I said, holding back the screen so that he might enter. We had not shaken hands as friends usually do on meeting, for, to speak the truth, the presence of my peon had been a bar to any act of condescension on my

part with one who to this man's thinking could only be a *yogi* after all. Neither had Bodh offered to greet me in that fashion ; indeed, there appeared to be a good deal of self-constraint on his part from the very first moment of our encounter, a natural feeling of reluctance to presume on an old acquaintanceship, no doubt, because of since altered circumstances.

"Sit down, my dear Bodh, sit down and let me hear how you have been keeping since I last saw you. There, take that chair, won't you ?" I added as soon as we were together in the room ; for Bodh in place of taking the chair I had indicated had squatted himself cross-legged on the carpet in front of me.

"No, no—do not trouble about me, Claire, I am quite all right where I am ; the fact is I have eschewed all chairs, all luxuries ever since I took to my present mode of life. I am now an ascetic as you see."

"Have you resigned the Service ?" I asked, quite at a loss to account for his strange behaviour.

"Yes ; I've resigned ; I've made up my mind that it's not worth the candle ; that life, after all, is but the prelude to the great hereafter ; that it behoves a man to make timely preparation for the change that is to come. Does not the Bible say : '*What doth it profit a man if he gain the whole world but suffer the loss of his own soul ?*' I learnt that from the Jesuit fathers.

"But surely you do not mean to say that you have thrown over your career ? that you have sacrificed possible honours, friends, position—everything in fact—in the pursuit of a chimera ?"

Bodh hung his head as though some internal spasm had momentarily overcome him ; but presently he looked up and asked in a somewhat husky voice :—

"Is it a chimera after all, Claire ? Is life such an ideality that man should cling to it, to the exclusion of his better self ? I have thrown over my career, as you but now remarked ; but what matters that ? I have not sacrificed my honour, I hope, in sacrificing my hopes of earthly grandeur, and my position among men ; and as for my friends—I trust that some of them, at all events those who knew me intimately and—and—had a regard for me, as I have had for them, —that these won't be ready to throw me over because of some slight derangement in my status then—and now."

There was a quiver in his voice as he said this, and he turned his face away for a brief instant.

"My dear Bodh," I said, greatly touched by his look and manner ; "I need hardly assure you that I still sincerely respect and honour you, and so, too, will my wife, when I have told her ; of that I have not the slightest doubt. I respect your principles, for I believe, sincerely and without equivocation, that you must have acted as you have done from the very highest and purest motives. No man throws up a career full of promise, such as yours was, except from the deepest conviction that what he means to do is for the best —the best, that is, as regards himself. Much as I may personally deplore the loss to the country of services, such as you might have rendered, still I should not be speaking the truth if I did not tell you that I marvel at your sacrifice no less profoundly than I admire your courage. If you still think my friendship valuable I need hardly assure you once more of it : I shall always be glad, my dear Bodh, to do you any little service that may lie in my power."

"Thank you ; thank you, Claire ; I knew I could count on you," said the young ascetic, controlling a strong feeling of emotion. "There is nothing that I want myself ; but—there is some one—my wife—and—infant son whom I should be glad if you would interest yourself in, even a little."

"Are you a married man with a wife and child then ?" I asked in astonishment.

Bodh nodded his head.

"Yes ; I was married fifteen months ago," he said with a sickly gasp. "I did not know then what I do now—or—. But what can it matter after all ?" he added with a gesture of impatience. "Man is but the plaything of fate."

"But, my dear Bodh, do you think a man is justified in sacrificing the happiness of those near and dear to him in the way you appear to have done, without giving them a choice in the matter ?"

"My wife assented fully to the course I have adopted, knowing it to be the right thing : my son—is too young to understand."

"Who is going to look after your wife, now that you have left home to become a wanderer on the face of the earth ?"

"She will live with my mother," said Bodh. "They will not be in want of anything as I have left them the enjoyment of my family property. It is my infant son's future I wish to be assured of—if it be no trouble to you, Claire, to give it an occasional thought."

"I am quite ready to do what I can, my dear fellow. Tell me what it is you wish me to do."

"I would like him to take up the career which I, alas! am not destined for. I want him to enter the Civil Service and wish his whole scholastic career to be so planned that it shall achieve that end. That was what my father did in my case, though his intentions, like the prophet's gourd, withered in a night under the blasting influence of an evil destiny."

It was the first time Bodh had shown an inclination to rail at fate, and the circumstance made me curious to know what kind of influence had operated to make him give up his career, as he seemed to have done, against his better judgment.

"There is no such thing as an evil destiny operating to any man's disadvantage," said I, hoping to provoke him into an explanation, yet groping in the dark for a reasonable cause which might help to explain his strange conduct. "The presumption that destiny—evil or otherwise—has anything to do with the shaping of a man's career is the negation of will—the denial to man of the right to choose for himself. You know that, my dear fellow."

"We will not argue as to that," said Bodh with a motion of his hand; "arguments lead nowhere and are only a waste of time. What I wanted to be sure about in seeking your assistance, Claire, was that you would consent to keep an eye on my son. There is, fortunately, no bar to his advancement along the path that may be marked out for him as there is in my case. I have ascertained that much for certain."

"I do not understand you, Bodh: you are an enigma to me. How can there be no bar against your son entering into and making the Indian Civil Service his career for life, and yet the same facilities be denied you who are already in the Service? I fail entirely to grasp your meaning."

"Do you remember the conversation we had on board ship that night when you told me about your mother's vow?" my friend opposite suddenly intervened.

I must have reddened unconsciously, for I noticed that Bodh's eyes all at once sparkled with a curious light.

"Well," continued Bodh, without giving me time to reply, "it may seem a strange coincidence to you, Claire, but I find that I am fettered, by just such a vow as you mentioned."

"You do not mean to say so?" exclaimed I, thrown momentarily off my guard in respect of a subject I had strictly determined never again to discuss.

"It is as I tell you," continued Bodh. "I was an only son as you were, an only son whose mother was rash enough to

condemn to early death for the boon of possessing him and her other offspring a few years."

"Ah!" said I, for the first time getting a glimpse into the mental attitude of the man before me; "your mother, I suppose, vowed you to the life of an ascetic and you have now taken on yourself the fulfilment of that vow."

"My mother," answered Bodh solemnly, "vowed her first born son to the service of Mahadeo if she should be blessed with children. She had children after that and I am the first born son of her prayers and tears."

"But why were you brought up to a career for which you were never really intended, if what you say is true?"

"The father of a household, as you are aware, Claire, may propose many things but it depends on the benign co-operation and acquiescence of the mother to see to their accomplishment. My father designed me for the Civil Service, meaning, no doubt, that I should do credit to the family name; my mother, poor weakly creature, had never given this side of the question a thought; she had never supposed that anyone, other than herself, could or would have an interest in disposing of the future of her only son, so she arranged what that future should be herself, without consulting or dreaming of consulting my father. Thus it has come about that the two ideals have clashed, and the more material has gone under."

"But what has been her motive in delaying the declaration of her purpose for so many years?"

"Motherly love, as usual, Claire; she could not bring herself to tell me of her vow until she had seen the family name secured by the birth of a son to me. When that event had at last occurred, she broke the silence she had maintained for twenty-eight years, knowing full well what the consequences were to be."

"What did your wife say to an arrangement which must blight her whole life and condemn her to early widowhood?"

"What could she say, Claire?—she could only take refuge in tears, poor thing. —I—I—I—persuaded her to submit to the divine will."

The tense state of the feelings of my friend kept me silent for some time; but presently I resumed in subdued tones.

"Whither are you bound now, Bodh?"

"I am on a pilgrimage to all the shrines of Mahadeva in the country," the young ascetic made reply. "It will take me some three years to accomplish."

"And after that?"

"After that will come the sacrifice," said the young searcher after truth, without the movement of a muscle of his face. Then he began an invocation to Mahadeo under his breath; a kind of sing-song recitative of which I could not catch the words. He scrambled to his feet ere yet the prayer, or whatever it was, was ended, fearing doubtless some display of human weakness, and declared it was time he went his way.

"I hope you will excuse my presumption in intruding on you at such a time and in such guise," he went on without offering me his hand as he might have done under ordinary circumstances; "but it was the sight of your name outside that prompted me to appeal to you to keep an eye on the welfare of my infant son. I trust you will not feel offended."

"Not in the least, not in the least, my dear Bodh," I cried, warmly grasping his hand in spite of the very evident reluctance he displayed to shake hands with me. "I shall do the best that lies in my power; rest assured."

With that my strange visitor took his departure. I followed him to the outer verandah, and watched him as he went down the gravelled path of the garden towards the front gate of the bungalow. Never once did he look back or turn to wave a parting farewell, but plodded steadily forward, the soft swish of his football keeping rhythmic time to the low chant with which it was accompanied.

I was still lost in contemplating his slowly receding figure, and thinking of the strange mysticism of the East that could lead a man of his culture and ability to give up a life of ease and enjoyment for one of hardship and self-abnegation, when a voice at my elbow recalled me to myself.

"Who is that man?" it inquired. I turned and saw Hetty by my side.

"Some poor devil who has lost his way," I replied, without knowing what I said.

"Poor fellow; call him back and give him some food," cried Hetty turning from me to give the peon the necessary order.

"No, no; don't," I exclaimed hastily, as I did not wish Hetty in her then state to know who it was that had been there that morning. "I have given him something already."

"Poor old man! If I had only seen him in time!" said my wife quite unaware of the personality of the man on whom she was thus unwittingly bestowing her sympathy.

For the rest of that day I felt restless and uncomfortable at the thought that notwithstanding the assurance I had given my wife I had let Bodh depart without any offers of financial assistance ; perhaps he had sought me out for that very purpose, but had felt reluctant at the last moment to proffer the request.

I would have sent the servant after him, but the thought that he might take offence deterred me, and so I let the matter rest where it was.

CHAPTER IX

THREE weeks, less a few days, perhaps, had slipped away ere I saw Mahadeo Narayan Bodh again in circumstances scarcely less peculiar than those we had last met in. It was my intention, as remarked already, to visit one of the more remote districts of my charge in the course of the present year, and I had worked out my tour programme accordingly to fit in with the great annual pilgrimage with which the temple of Mahadeo in this Gosai Ghat district was associated. Between fifty and a hundred thousand persons usually visited the temple in the course of a single week at this time; so it may easily be figured out what the railway traffic was like, notwithstanding the fact that vast numbers of the pilgrims tramped across country on foot, while those who could afford it came in their own or their neighbours' bullock carts.

It is astonishing to observe with what marvellous industry the religious systems of the old world have developed the idea of popular pilgrimages. A community of devotees dwelling in some remote or secluded country district would be in danger of starvation were its wants not supplied by the eleemosynary gifts of religious enthusiasts. To keep alive the spark of faith, to spread abroad a belief in the efficacy of prayer said at certain seasons of the year, at certain particular spots, to certain gods or saints, we may take it offers the best, nay, in most instances the only, means whereby such communities may exist in comfort in the midst of a none too apparent prosperity. Hence the growth of the pilgrim traffic, which in India has assumed gigantic proportions.

The average Hindu pilgrim is generally as simple minded as a child, big in the faith that is in him, and as a child generous in parting with his substance. Poor almost to the verge of penury, he is yet blessed with that seeming content which hesitates not to stint itself that the wants of others may be appeased. Therein he resembles man at his best;

for it is in helping to relieve misery that man proves his superiority to the beasts of the field and approximates in some degree to our conceptions of a divine, generous and beneficent Creator.

Instead of going East, as had been my wont ever since I came into the Beldia district after my mother's death, I turned south on the present occasion, and after a forty miles journey by train, and a ten miles jaunt into the country by motor car, Hetty and I at length found ourselves comfortably installed in our camp which had been pitched in a mango tope. I was new to this part of the country, though the officials I now came in contact with were not in every instance strangers to me.

The crowd at the temple on the present occasion, I was told, was a record one.

"Look there, across the river and up the sides of those hills facing the stream the whole countryside is alive with them," said John Kavanagh, the young Superintendent of Police, who like myself had been drawn to this locality by the call of duty. "We shall have an awful time, I fear, getting all these thousands clear of the place without an epidemic."

"Where are you putting up?" I enquired, not without a feeling of misgiving at the danger he was incurring.

"In the grove yonder," he replied, waving his hand to the right to indicate the position. "My camp is three hundred yards to the west of yours, Sir. I couldn't stick the travellers' bungalow, with its dust and noise from the bazaar opposite, and the infernal din of the ever passing crowds of cymbal-clanging pilgrims."

"Come and dine with us tonight, then, if you haven't anything special to do," I said, glad of the opportunity of a little company in so sequestered a spot.

"Righto!" cried Kavanagh with enthusiasm. "It's merely a hop, skip and jump from my present abode to this and no dangerous nullahs to cross. I'll have a look round now to see that my men have been properly posted round your camp, Sir, and then I'll get off to the temple to see that everything goes smoothly with the crowd."

I nodded my head and entered our encampment while Kavanagh in his top boots and clinking spurs made the tour of the police sentries who had previously been placed round the tope of mango trees under which the Collector Saheb's tents had been pitched.

At dinner that night Kavanagh expatiated on the occurrences of the two or three days he had been there preceding our arrival.

"There is a queer chap over here," said he in the course of conversation, "a sort of Yogi, or Sunyasi, or whatever you call them, who sits all day in the shade of a banyan tree reading sacred books. By Jove, you should see the crowds he has about him at all hours. They do everything he wants them to, cook his food for him, serve it up for him on plantain leaves, light a pipe for him when he wants a smoke, roll out a mat for him when he is tired and says he would sleep, and I do not know what the dickens else they won't do if he tells them. Just the kind of chap to stir up trouble for us, mind you, if he's bent on mischief."

"What sort of fellow is he, old or young?" I asked pricking up my ears at the policeman's description of the strange ascetic, for, needless to say, I had never ceased to think of my young friend Bodh and the strange life he had taken to ever since his visit to me three weeks previously.

"He looks young," said Kavanagh, "though I've never been near enough to interview him. He seems to avoid one's eyes, to my seeming; you know the sort of furtive glance out of the corner of the eye to see if you're coming and then a pretence at reading, eh?"

"Point him out to me tomorrow when we go down to the temple," said I as casually as I could, for I did not want Hetty's curiosity to be piqued. "I dare say he is nothing but a poor devil who is trying to make a living out of the credulity of the common herd. It is what millions of men are doing the world over in various ways, every day of their lives."

Kavanagh gave no heed to the sweeping nature of my philosophic reflection, but merely observed:—

"We keep an eye on him, all the same, in case he is up to any of his dodges. I know his breed pretty well; half the gang robberies we have been handling of late are run by such innocents as he."

"Do you have many robberies on these occasions, Mr. Kavanagh?" asked Hetty who had hitherto merely given expression to the usual casual observations regarding the weather, which most persons make use of in their general causeries.

"So far the Mahadeo fair has shown no signs of breaking the record in moral obliquity, Mrs. Claire," said the young Superintendent of Police, laughing. "We have caught a few pick-pockets; but that is all. However, we shall soon know if there are any gangs present in this assemblage of the fair. An epidemic of burglaries is a pretty sure indication that a gang is operating."

"Regarding the man you were speaking about a moment ago, I would not trouble him if I were you," said I to Kavanagh, well knowing how much inconvenience a little extra zeal on the part of an officious policeman can occasion. "Just leave him alone, and let me know if anything occurs. I shall be able to give you my opinion after I have seen him."

"Very well, Sir," said Kavanagh who thereby intimated that he understood my last remark to be an order conveyed demi-officially for his guidance, hence having relieved my mind of the burden of seeing that Bodh was not inconvenienced by meddlesome underlings, I was able to turn to the duty of entertaining our guest in as genial a manner as was possible in our present situation.

We sat out in the open under the trees after dinner and talked of friends and relations at home, of the pleasant times we had had during holiday jaunts, and the delight it would have been to all three of us to have had the Christmas and New Year, but recently gone, with these same friends in the old country. Most persons are apt to develop a sentimental vein when they sit out in the moonlight under an Indian sky and talk of absent dear ones or subjects of common interest. Kavanagh told us some shikar stories, which though not outside the pale of probability, yet made no demands on one's credulity that it was impossible to concede. However, we did not much mind, especially as he made us laugh pretty often at the piquant Irish way in which he described some of the inevitable predicaments in which the would-be tiger-slayer usually finds himself when he sets forth to add a ten-foot tiger skin to his collection of butterflies and birds' eggs. Kavanagh had been through the school of experience, had seen the funny side of his and others' adventures, and did not mind if the laugh went against himself. He was quite pleasant company, and when at last, shortly after ten o'clock, he set off for his own Camp, Hetty and I turned in with the pleasing consciousness that we had made our guest happy.

We were early astir the following morning, and as Hetty said she would prefer accompanying me to the temple to sitting in the camp doing nothing, we set off together, Hetty taking a light pink sunshade with her that gave an added richness to her naturally fine complexion. She was dressed in a light grey habit that fitted her fine figure exquisitely; her rich auburn hair was gathered in a coiffure beneath her white sun-hat in a way that I thought lent a special pose to her profile, and altogether I felt proud that my wife was so goodlooking a woman.

We had proceeded but a few hundred yards down the shaded avenue of the main trunk-road when we were joined by Kavanagh and a mounted native orderly. The young

Superintendent was dressed in khaki and greeted us with a salute and cordial "Good Morning" as he fell into line with us, on Hetty's left. The look of pleased astonishment and admiration which I had detected in his eyes the moment they rested on Hetty showed plainly that I had not been too partial in my estimate of my wife's attractions that morning. Hetty had never appeared to better advantage, to my thinking, than on this occasion, and I was gratified to find that there were others who seemed ready to endorse my opinion.

Early as it was, it was soon apparent that the crowds of pilgrims who had come to this remote temple were already astir and were crowding to the shrine with their votive offerings. From the direction of the river a constant sibilation, that was only now and again to be distinguished as the buzz of human voices, was wafted to our ears, while the stridulous creak of whirligigs and merry-go-rounds, heard in the intervals, told us plainly how the more frivolous among the younger folk were disporting themselves. It was evident that the money-making instinct was by no means dormant among those whom the festival had attracted to the spot, since side by side with the religious observance the usual popular fair was already going merrily forward.

Half a mile from the spot where we had struck the road a broad dusty track, much broken and rutted from the passage of countless wheels, pointed to where the path led down to the river bank with its adjacent temple. We were about to take this short cut when the chatter of horse-hoofs on the road from the direction opposite to that we had just come made us pause and look for enlightenment in the quarter whence the sound emanated. It was then we observed two riders coming rapidly towards us, and you might have knocked me down with a feather at the surprise I felt on discovering that the newcomers were none other than Kate Westerley and Captain Savage.

"Well, I'm jiggered if this isn't luck," cried the Captain as he and Miss Westerley drew rein alongside us. "Who'd have thought to meet you here, Claire; and Mrs. Claire too. By Jove, this is a pleasant surprise."

He sprang lightly to the ground as he spoke and helped Miss Westerley to dismount.

"How did you find your way here?" I asked when we had exchanged greetings and I had introduced Kavanagh to the new arrivals.

"We are in Camp farther up the stream at a place called Jungle Ghat," Savage replied, and as Miss Westerley expressed a wish to see an Indian Fair I decided to ride over

to the temple with her this morning and gratify her curiosity."

"We've had a five miles ride already," put in Kate Westerley whose face clearly indicated that amount of exercise, "and with five miles back, that will make ten miles before breakfast. Not bad, is it?"

"But surely you'll stay and breakfast with us, Miss Westerley?" I asked politely. "It will be better for you both than to ride back all the way in the sun."

"Yes, do;" put in Hetty. "We are living quite like hermits in the mango tope yonder."

"Were's that?" asked Kate eagerly.

"Just down the road," said Hetty and I almost in a breath, indicating the position as best we could from the spot we then occupied.

"It is a nice shady grove, the best we could find hereabouts," put in Kavanagh. "You are far from the madding crowd over there and the noise of the tom-tomming is not likely to reach you. That is why we selected it for Mr. Claire's camp."

"Well, *Kia Karinga?*" asked Kate, laughingly referring the question to her companion. Do you vote for breakfast, lunch, and tea with the Claires and a ride home in the evening, or shall it be as we originally agreed, as soon as we have gratified our curiosity?"

"I'm at your disposal for today, Kate, so decide the matter whichever may suit you best. I certainly would accept Mr. and Mrs. Claire's very kind hospitality if it was left to me," said Captain Savage turning to us.

"Very well; that decides it," said Kate. "Trust a man for choosing what's most convenient to him. Mrs. Claire we are your guests for today. I hope we shan't be putting you out more than can be helped, because, really, it is too dreadful that we should thrust ourselves on you thus when you are yourselves not quite settled."

"It won't be any inconvenience at all," said Hetty good-naturedly. "So do not worry on that score. However, let us waste no more time. I shall thank you Mr. Kavanagh, to let your orderly ride back with a message to my cook to have breakfast for five instead of three."

There was a burst of laughter at this, and we all resumed our walk towards the temple while Kavanagh turned to tell his mounted orderly what he was to do.

The noise of the fair was momentarily borne in upon us with ever-increasing resonance as we proceeded, and pre-

sently we could see the crowds round and about the temple. They were there in their thousands, persons of every walk in life, from the merest infant in arms to the hoariest of grandfathers and grandmothers, all laughing and chatting, calling to each other by name, or else helping to swell the *tintamarre* by a variety of clacks, drums, and trumpets in every imaginable key. Above the uproar and racket there rolled towards us every now and then on the wings of the wind the deep reverberations of a drum which seemed to come from the interior of the temple and dominated the other sounds with a bombilation that made the very lobes of one's ears quake. A glance at Hetty and Kate Westerley sufficed to show me that the noise and jangle were having the effect they usually do on highly sensitive natures: both were keenly alive to their surroundings, both displayed more than ordinary animation, and, perhaps, without even intending it, both were stepping out with greater briskness than they had yet displayed. We paused a moment on the edge of the crowd to allow Captain Savage time to fasten the horses to a tree, and then on again we plunged into the vortex of humanity, a way being cleared for us by some of Kavanagh's men.

The press, however, was not so great as to impede one's movements. There was activity, but it was not of the ant order, where one is continually plunging into one's companions and apologising for the inconvenience caused. The crowd was more staid in its movements, more light-hearted in the manner in which it fulfilled its religious obligations. Here and there one came across little groups of idlers standing round a strolling acrobat, or a knot of listeners squatting contentedly on their haunches, while itinerant musicians with accompanying *tubla* trolled off mellifluous strophes in praise of Rama. Anon one came across some family priest, or village *pujari* to whose godly keeping the votive offerings of his charges had been entrusted; farther away were groups of blind beggars singing noisily to the clink of silvery cymbals or the clap of drum. It was weird, mystic entrancing to the Western mind—a scene eminently Eastern in its perfervid theopathy.

"Here is the fellow I was telling you about last night," remarked Kavanagh in an undertone to me as we came upon a more than usually numerous collection of pilgrims seated crosslegged under a wide-spreading banyan-tree.

There must have been some hundreds of them listening in rapt attention while a holy man, nude to the waist but ash-smeared from head to foot, read in loud sonorous tones from a book that lay open on his knees. That man, as I surmised would turn out to be the case, was Mahadeo Narayan Bodh;

but whether he was conscious of our presence, or having seen us, gave no further heed, I am unable to say. All I know is that he went on reading without pause or stay, in the same melodious diatonic tone that I had heard when first I strolled up to the fringe of the crowd with the young Superintendent of Police.

I was glad, then, both for his and my own sake, that the ladies were not with us at the moment. They had been drawn off to one side by something that had attracted their attention, and had moved on under Captain Savage's guidance in quite a different direction.

"Do not interfere with that man, Kavanagh; I think he is all right." I remarked quietly to my companion as we continued our walk towards the temple. "You will oblige me if you issue instructions to your subordinates to avoid giving him any offence whatever."

"Very well, Sir," said Kavanagh, immediately beckoning to an Indian Sub-Inspector who had been following in our wake to come up. What he told the man I do not know, but I have no doubt that Bodh very soon after that must have noted a marked change in the demeanour of the subordinate police towards him.

CHAPTER X

UP to this time, I must confess, it had never struck me that the place of Hindu worship I was about to visit could by any manner of means be familiar to me. My official career had never before brought me to this remote district, so that the temple and all its surroundings were as unknown to me as, let me say, the Acropolis of Athens would be, or the rock-hewn caves of Afghanistan. And yet the moment I set eyes on the battlemented portal that gave entrance to the interior and put foot on the wide terraced steps leading to the river bank, I became mentally conscious of a feeling of familiarity with my surroundings ; I looked for and expected to see certain objects, and there, sure enough, they were : the sense of novelty, the rapid succession of sensations which recency gives were wanting and in their stead were the trite, the everyday, the customary, images of familiarity.

It was not till some time afterwards that I attempted to recall the past in order to give to these impressions a fixed chronology. At the moment I made no effort to analyse my feelings as they were—storing up the embryonic ideas that were to furnish me with thoughts in the future.

Kate Westerley joined Kavanagh and myself as we were crossing the threshold of the main entrance. She seemed a trifle excited and out of breath, I thought ; but this may have been due to the fact that she had run up the steps in her haste to join us. Captain Savage and Hetty could not be very far behind, I felt assured, so that there appeared to be no reason why a girl of Miss Westerley's assurance should experience any misgivings even in a crowd of so heterogeneous a character. Everywhere, as we approached, the people gave way before us, and even now with numbers issuing forth from the interior of the edifice, we found no difficulty in entering.

It was quite apparent that the custodians of the shrine were having a busy time of it, and from the continual dron-

ing of the drum on the terraced roof at one side there could be no doubt that, early though it was, the god was with considerable difficulty being kept awake to attend to the prayers of his many petitioners.

As we neared the outer quadrangle of the temple we came upon an old man sitting crosslegged under one of the carved arches of the vestibule. He was crooning something to himself in a soft undertone. Nobody appeared to take any notice of him, and to my thinking he seemed to care very little for all that was going forward around him. The strange part of the whole thing, however, was that I fancied I recognized in him a very close resemblance to, if not an actual counterpart, of the wizened old priest whom I had seen in my dream on the night of the Beldia Ball. The man's presence fascinated me, and I caught myself taking careful stock of his person. Yes, there, sure enough, was the smearing of ashes on his throat, and the sacred thread looped across one shoulder. He was reading a book, as that other old man had been; but there the similarity in the two scenes ended, for there was no five-branched brass lamp at hand, no posnet of thank-offerings indicative of an early visit to the sanctuary, nor were the nails on the old priest's fingers of such inordinate length as to attract attention.

A single glance sufficed to impress these details on my mind, for the consciousness that somebody was looking at him doubtless made the old priest look up, when our glances met. His eyes were of grey-green hue, chatoyant in their variability, as I saw the moment recognition came into them.

"Ah, Claire Saheb! I am glad to see you after all these years," he said rising up and ambling forward with difficulty as though age had stiffened his joints and destroyed the buoyant elasticity of youth. "I am glad, indeed, that my eyes have been gratified by a sight of your face once again."

"Indeed," said I not unkindly, for it was easy to read the sincerity of the greeting in the ancient anchorite's smiling face. "I am afraid your memory is better than mine, bhat sahib, because I have clean forgotten you."

"Maybe, maybe," said the old man blinking in the bright sunlight. "You have travelled much and have met many people. How is it possible you should remember Kashinath Ghorpade of the Mahadeo temple? But I remember you, you see? Are you not Claire Saheb, the Collector?"

"Yes, I am Claire Saheb, the Collector ; still I have no recollection of you."

The ancient hierophant passed a lean, tremulous hand across his eyes as if to improve his mental and physical vision.

I too have travelled many years," he sighed. "I too have been in many distant cities on pilgrimage, and now am I come back to the place of my birth to die. Have you forgotten how you once threatened to punish and put me in goal, Claire Saheb, because I accepted the memsaheb's offerings for Shri ? Did I not tell you then that what had to be would be, and that punishing me would be of little avail ? Did I not say you would one day come back and bring the boy with you ? Where is the boy ? Is this he ?" he concluded, turning abruptly to gaze at Kavanagh.

"I am afraid you are making a mistake," I said dubiously, though an idea crept into my head, that after all the old fellow most probably was right, mistaken, though he might be as to personalities. "This is my first visit to these parts ; I have never been here before ; and as to the boy, I do not know whom you refer to."

This reply quite nonplussed Kashinath Ghorpade : it was easy to see that. For a moment or two he stood speechless and irresolute, looking first at Kavanagh, then at me, and then back again at the young policeman. At last he mumbled something under his breath.

"Hail, Mother, it cannot be !" he finally exclaimed aloud looking fixedly at me. "It cannot be that my eyes, grown dim with years, deceive me. It is Claire Saheb himself. I am old and foolish, but I know Claire Saheb well."

"Well, what of that ?" said I reassuringly. "You are surely not afraid of Claire Saheb now. He does not come to threaten you with imprisonment."

"Nay, I am not afraid now as I once was. I was young and easily scared in those days ; so I ran away and became a Sunnyassi. I have got over my fears since then. The holy Mother bade me return to the temple and resume my duties, so here am I again. And Claire Saheb has come back too. It is strange, strange, but ah ! how true : he remains young and strong too, while I am grown old and feeble. Aye-o, such is the will of the Mother."

"The old chap seems to know you well," whispered Kavanagh under his breath, while Kashinath Ghorpade went to the spot where he had been seated on our entry, for the purpose of getting his book, as it turned out.

"He is mistaking me for my father, I'm thinking," said I in the same undertone. "My father was in charge of this district, I believe, years ago, and it is quite possible that he knew him then."

We said no more on the subject, just then, as Kashinath Ghorpade having secured his treasured volume was returning to us with a smile of satisfaction on his features.

"Come," he addressed me when near enough at hand to assure his remark not being mistaken by the Indians whom curiosity was already attracting to the spot. "Come let us go into the sanctuary. The Shri will be glad to see you after all these years."

He led the way through the crowds that were pouring out of the inner temple, and we followed as best we could. It was then that turning to give Kate Westerley the benefit of our joint protection we found that she had disappeared from the scene. Kavanagh seemed rather alarmed at first and questioned the subordinate who had been his faithful attendant up to this point; but I reassured him, and when he heard the man say that the Missie Saheb had preceded us into the sanctuary of the temple, he accepted the explanation and we went on.

The sight of hundreds of pairs of country shoes lying scattered promiscuously about the courtyard warned us that it might be necessary to follow the example of the rest of the worshippers; but when I hinted at the necessity Kashinath Ghorpade waved the objection aside.

"What does it matter," he remarked, "I have seen some Rajas and Chiefs go barefooted into temples, while others have gone in shod as you are, Claire Saheb, in English boots. So what does it matter. You are here only for a few minutes; you are accustomed to go to your places of worship with shoe-clad feet, so come along. Young people may be particular in the observance of such ceremonies but we old ones know that it is not the outward forms that matter so much as the inward faith."

The scene hereabouts was quite as animated as it was outside, the place being alive with worshippers, some issuing forth, others crowding about the doors of the inner sanctuary, others again walking round and round the sanctuary walls muttering invocations to the deity for the blessings they expected to derive from their peculiar actions. Above the sibilation could be heard the roll of the great drum booming out with a droning that dwarfed all other sounds and made it necessary for conversations to be carried on at a high pitch; while the clangorous peals, every second, of the bells suspended above the doorways of the two sanctuaries showed

that worshippers were succeeding each other in rapid succession.

Avoiding the crowds at the main shrine Kashinath Ghorpade led us to the rear of the building. The circumstance at once brought to my mind the story my mother had told me and I was curious to see whether my experience was going to be the same as hers. That this was the identical temple to which she and her ayah had come forty years before, and this selfsame priest who had helped to scare her I felt more than ever convinced, for it was easy to see that the ancient custodian of the hidden mysteries evidently mistook me for my father and feared there was going to be a repetition of the penalties with which he had been previously threatened.

Leaving the main shrine of Mahadeo whose festival it was, and whose image was therefore the recipient of all the homage of the worshippers, Kashinath Ghorpade took us, as I have said, to the back of the building. With the exception of the few persons who were performing the devotion of walking seven times round the sanctuary this part was quite free from the crowds thronging the main entrance. Our progress was therefore uninterrupted. Without pausing to see if we were following him Kashinath Ghorpade led us straight to the inner shrine, clanging the bell overhead as he crossed the threshold. We stepped briskly after him, and in a few seconds found ourselves standing inside, gazing up at the life-sized figure of the goddess Kali, the most ferocious, repulsive, and dreaded of deities conceived of by mortal man. What Kavanagh's feelings were like it is not for me to say : my own I know were a queer mixture of creepy uncanniness not without a substratum of awe ; and the transition came about so swiftly that for the nonce I was unable to think rationally. The sound of the old priest's voice, however, chanting some hymn of praise, woke me to a sense of my surroundings and I was able to note occurrences with a better appreciation of their significance. Kashinath Ghorpade had picked up a tray containing rose-petals which had, perhaps, formed part of the offerings of some earlier devotee, and was waving this about in front of the idol as he muttered his chant.

"Behold, O Mother," he cried "thy servant hath returned to thy worship. Accept this offering at my hands, O devi, goddess of the dreadful eyes, and slay us not for our misdeeds."

There was much more in the same strain that the old priest hummed rather than chanted, for his voice rose and fell in a queer sing-song fashion ; but this much am I able to recall, for presently I found myself comparing my own

sensations with what I imagined my mother must have felt when as a young woman, inexperienced in Indian ways and manners, she had ventured to pry into the mysteries of oriental theopathy.

It was easy to see how the large gooseberry eyes of the image, the gaping mouth and protruding tongue, ensanguined with the blood of the monsters the goddess is supposed to have slain, might strike terror into a person, beholding such things for the first time. Their effects on my own indurated nerves were not a little perplexing, for there was certainly a strange creepy feeling about my neck and forehead that wasn't there before, and the longer I gazed at the image the more I felt convinced that the glassy eyes were regarding me with a sort of gloating triumph, a malicious evil satisfaction that seemed almost to utter the words "at last I have you in my power!"

I turned to step out of the noisome atmosphere of the apartment : I had had enough of this tomfoolery, I felt, and must get out into the fresh air. As I wheeled round I came face to face with Captain Savage, near whom stood Hetty. A single glance at my wife's pale, set features sufficed to show me that the ordeal had been quite as unnerving for her as it had undoubtedly been, years before for my dear mother. With one accord we all moved out of the narrow apartment together, and when in the open air and sunshine once again, Hetty unobtrusively crept round to my side and slipped her arm through mine. The action spoke volumes for the state of her feelings ; so I said little, but hastened to get her away from her present surroundings, seeking to reassure her by the gentle pressure of my fingers on her hand.

" Queer place that, by Jove ! " exclaimed Captain Savage the moment we had got free. " Seems to me the image was the figure of a mud woman, standing on the body of a man. Say, did you notice the necklace of skulls round her neck ? "

" Yes," answered Kavanagh, " that is a representation of the goddess Kali, and the figure under her foot is her husband Siva."

" Whew . not a nice position for a husband to occupy, eh ? Hardly encouraging for the matrimonially inclined Hindu youth." He laughed as he said this and looked round for Kate Westerley whom he had apparently not missed till then. " Where is Miss Westerley ? " he asked suddenly.

" She was with us a few minutes before we went in," I said as we walked towards the entrance.

" My man says he saw Miss Westerley going into the temple," Kavanagh made answer. " I will ask him again ? "

Hetty and I stood apart while the two men sought out the Sub-Inspector where we had last seen him. In a little while they reappeared with him, the subordinate leading the way to the very part of the edifice from which we had just emerged.

The three disappeared round the building, and while they were gone I led Hetty down the steps and out of the throng to the welcome shade of a tamarind tree growing high up on the river bank.

"Let us get away home, Arthur; I am not feeling quite like myself this morning," whispered Hetty; and I could see that she was showing signs of nervous agitation and that her face had lost all the fresh pink colour of the morning.

"Very well, dear," I answered, "Come along. Would you like to take my arm?"

"No, I think I can walk all the better alone," said Hetty. "Besides we can get along faster thus."

She seemed anxious to escape from the neighbourhood, but we had not proceeded very far when we were hailed by Kavanagh whom we then saw hastening towards us.

"Savage says he wants to have a look round the crowds to see if Miss Westerley has wandered out among them," shouted the young policeman as he came towards us. "She was not anywhere inside the temple as far as I could make out, though we searched everywhere. I daresay she missed us and wandered off by herself to see if we had gone outside."

"Very likely," I replied, as it seemed absurd to suggest that anything could have happened to a self-reliant girl like Kate Westerley with such crowds about. "She has temporarily lost herself in the throng, that is all. I daresay she will presently reappear smiling and happy over her adventure."

"She cannot have gone back to our tents," Hetty ventured to remark, "as the horses are still where we left them."

Kavanagh and I looked in the direction indicated and saw that both horses were standing under the tree where Savage had fastened them.

"I think I had better go back and help Savage to look for her," said Kavanagh as he tapped his boot uneasily with his cane.

"Yes do," said I, "and come on to breakfast the three of you afterwards. We'll just get along to the camp in the meantime, and see that everything is ready."

Touching his hat with two fingers to Hetty and myself Kavanagh strode away, and we resumed our walk to the camp.

"What did the old priest mean when he said 'Hail Mother, here is the boy; she has brought the boy with her?'" asked Hetty with unconcealed concern when we were out of hearing of Kavanagh and the throng. "Do you think he—he—could have guessed at—;" she left the sentence unfinished, though I fully understood what she meant to say.

"I never heard him say that," I answered, for truth to tell, I have no recollection of his saying anything of the kind.

"He did," persisted Hetty; "I heard the words quite distinctly."

"That's strange," said I. "When was that?"

"Just as Captain Savage and I stepped into the room. He was moving that plate with the rose-petals on it up and down in front of the idol but stopped and turned to us when we entered."

"What was I doing at the time?"

"You and Mr. Kavanagh were looking up at that dreadful image on the pedestal," said Hetty.

"Are you quite sure he made use of those words, dear?" I asked, still a little sceptical.

"I heard them, anyway," said my wife decidedly.

We walked on in silence a short distance, and then Hetty spoke again.

"Do you recollect, Arthur, what your mother told you that morning in her bedroom when you both thought I was away in my own room?"

"I have some recollection, I think," I answered evasively as I did not like any allusion to the subject, especially on the part of Hetty.

"I have always felt somehow since then that that spell or whatever it was that troubled your mother, Arthur, would one day descend on me," continued Hetty. "I have always had a presentiment of some evil overshadowing me, and now I feel convinced that the time is coming when I shall experience that evil. O, Arthur, I feel frightened."

Hetty stopped short in her walk and threw so appealing a look at me that I verily believe if the old villain who had

upset her composure thus unaccountably had been present at the moment I should have forgotten my position, my manhood, even his very decrepitude and have struck him down at her feet, I felt so overcome with anger. Mastering my passion with a great effort, though I have no doubt my voice betrayed the state of my emotions, I drew her arm within my own and said as soothingly as I could : "Do not worry, dear ; I am always at hand to protect you."

She said nothing, but took my arm and we completed the rest of the journey in silence.

CHAPTER XI

WE had breakfast nearly an hour later than usual that morning and even then had to do without the promised company of Kate Westerley and Captain Savage. The latter sent his regrets by Kavanagh : the search for Miss Westerley, it seems, had proved unavailing and so had been reluctantly abandoned. But the Captain felt in no mood for a day's stay in the neighbourhood. The young lady had set out in his company and more or less under his protection, and if she had returned alone to the cavalry camp it was his duty to ascertain the fact with as little delay as possible or else report to her parents what had occurred.

"Savage seemed rather upset, I thought, at my suggestion that, perhaps, Miss Westerley had returned home," said Kavanagh. "It was his opinion that she would not lightly have set aside her engagement to spend the day with you and Mrs. Claire; and that nothing but some dire necessity made her give it up, if it should prove to be true that she had indeed gone away. He asked me to express his regrets to both Mrs. Claire and yourself, and promised to write as soon as he reached his mess.

"I do not see how she is going to get back to the cavalry encampment on foot at this hour of the day and in this sun too," said I, rather ungraciously, I fear, for the incident was capable of several disagreeable interpretations to anyone in search of a grievance. "Their encampment is five miles upstream, I believe."

"When they joined us they said they had had a five miles ride," put in Hetty; "at least Miss Westerley said so. I suppose it cannot have been very much less or Captain Savage would have corrected the estimate."

"There is a small bridge across the river some five or six miles upstream at a village called Tolghat," Kavanagh answered. "It is quite likely. I think Savage said the name of the place was Jungle Ghat," I interposed.

"Now that you mention it I think he did," Kavanagh admitted. "That would place their camp somewhat nearer to us than Tolghat is."

"Still that does not help to explain Miss Westerley's disappearance, nor provide a satisfactory answer to the all important question, how is she to get home on foot?"

"I'm no hand at riddles," said Kavanagh. "I give it up. When a woman sets out to astonish her friends and acquaintances we may generally count on her doing so to the full extent of her limited ability. Pardon my somewhat flippant allusion to your sex, Mrs. Claire, I speak only as a policeman."

Hetty laughed, for the first time that morning, and the sound was as a tonic to my ears and even wrought feelings. It was as if a load of anxiety had been lifted off my mind.

"You are not very complimentary for a young man, I must say," my wife said addressing the policeman, while I felt a marvellous sympathy for Kavanagh's callow philosophy.

The young man, however, laughed Hetty's good-natured rebuke aside.

"I meant no offence, Mrs. Claire; still you must admit that Miss Westerley's disappearing feat will take some beating."

"Well, let us hope that it won't prove quite so strange as it seems just now," said Hetty with a return of much of her old zest.

"The cavalry may have chosen the plateau on the northern bank for their camping ground, in which case Miss Westerley would be right."

"I wonder what made her go off in the way she did?" I interposed. She had not taken her horse, because we saw both animals tethered where Savage had placed them."

"Both were in the same place when we returned," confirmed Kavanagh. "Savage said he would take Miss Westerley's back with him."

"Did he?"

"Yes; he rode his own and led the other by the bridle."

"Strange," said I. "You had better set your men investigating, Kavanagh. A young woman of Miss Westerley's disposition is not easily led by odd whims and fancies to undertake sudden and mysterious evanescences."

"I shouldn't say so from the little I've seen of her," the young Superintendent made answer. "She seemed a cool sort and one quite capable of looking after herself. But in a crowd of such dimensions women are apt to lose their heads. However, I have told my men to make inquiries."

"Kate Westerley won't easily lose her head," Hetty ventured with what I thought was a somewhat meaning look at me.

"The deuce," said I to myself; "Hetty, surely, doesn't seriously think that I've been responsible for Kate Westerley's tantrums; and yet let me confess it, I was not without misgivings myself that Kate had got it into her head that 'Sid' was paying more than his wonted share of attention to handsome Mrs. Claire. She may have done so; who can say? we are all creatures of impulse and apt to be led away by what we see. Besides, hadn't she left them together and joined us as we were entering the temple? That, as the lawyers would say, was confirmatory evidence of growing pique, or jealousy, or whatever you will.

It was not till next day that we had further news of Miss Westerley, and then the post brought Hetty a letter from the wanderer.

"Dear Mrs. Claire" (it said),

"I do not know how to apologise for my very extraordinary disappearance of yesterday. The fact is, I quite missed you all and did not know where to find you. Then an Indian gentleman who happened to be driving by in a motor car offered to give me a lift but he either misunderstood my instructions or else deliberately ignored them, as instead of taking me to your encampment he brought me on to the railway station.

"I felt so vexed to think of the disappointment I was causing you, and especially of the anxiety you must have been put to on my account. Please convey my apologies to Mr. Claire.

"Having come to the station, however I decided that there was nothing else for it but to take the very first train I could catch and go on to Somma. By good luck I got into the Beldia Mail.

"So you see, after all, dear Mrs. Claire, I shall get back safely to Somma. Mother will be quite surprised I know to see me turn up, as she thinks I am still at the Cavalry Camp with father.

"Well, who could have thought when I set out to see the fair this morning that I would be sixty or seventy miles distant from the scene by evening?

"I am writing to father and Captain Savage by, I hope, the same post to assure them of my safety.

"With kind regards to Mr. Claire and many thanks for your hospitality which, I fear, I have greatly abused,

"Believe me,

"Yours very sincerely,

"Kate Westerley."

"P.S.

"I have written this letter in the train and hope to post it at the first station we stop at. Hope you will excuse both pencil and paper."

There were one or two circumstances connected with this letter that I thought needed explanation. Hetty had handed the missive over to me the moment she had read it, merely remarking : "Well, I like her cheek. Still, I think she might have chosen a less pungent scent when perfuming her stationery."

I laughed, for I had noticed the faint aroma of attar of roses—a favourite Indian perfume, by the way—pervading the air as soon as I laid hand on the letter.

"She must have borrowed the letter paper from the station master and her pencil from the tally-clerk," I said, "as both show signs of wear and tear."

"What could have made her go on to the railway station when she knew our camp was only a few minutes drive off the main road ?" Hetty inquired with that propensity for seeking motives behind actions that most women display.

"She says the man misunderstood or else deliberately ignored her instructions, does she not ?"

"That's mere fudge," said Hetty. "She did not suppose the fellow meant to kidnap her, did she ? In the first place, why did she want to get into the car at all ? She had her horse, and she knew we were not very far off. Why get into a car with a stranger if she did not mean to go a long journey ?"

"Perhaps she missed her way and came out on the other side of the temple," I suggested.

"She would have had to cross the river, you mean, if she wished to lose us quite," said Hetty. "No, I do not like the motor car story. It sounds a little too improbable."

"Still there is her letter, written in the train perhaps thirty or forty miles from here. It does sound a little improbable to say she could have covered the ten miles between this and the station on foot and yet have had time to write her letter so as to catch the return mail. But there is the fact, all the same."

"I give it up," said Hetty, turning on her heel. "Make what you like of it, Arthur; I think there is something unexplained behind that letter."

The more I thought out the details the more surely convinced did I become that there was in truth something behind the whole affair. It came to this, then: should I or should I not let Kavanagh see her letter? He would have to be told at once, of course, of her safety; but would it be advisable to tell him, of our doubts, which would be tantamount to saying that we did not believe she was really safe? After some reflection I decided to say nothing about the letter beyond the bare fact that it had been received.

So I dropped Kavanagh a note to say my wife had had a letter from Miss Westerley who was apparently quite safe and well at Somma. How she had got there in so short a time, or why she had chosen to vanish in so unaccountable a manner were questions I did not choose to discuss.

It was not till late that evening that Kavanagh gave any intimation about the receipt of my note.

"I have been out all day having a toasting time of it in the sun, and have only just got back. Your note was handed to me when I dismounted a while ago and I came over at once. I suppose, it is all right, Sir, about this?" He gave my chit a fillip with his finger as he spoke.

"Miss Westerley seems to be with her mother at Somma?" I said in a non-committal tone.

Since you say so, Sir, I daresay you have good reasons for your belief, otherwise I should be inclined to think differently."

"Indeed!" I exclaimed. "Beyond the fact that my wife had a letter from her this morning in which she positively stated that she had gone back to her mother we know nothing. Would you like to see the letter?"

"I should if you don't mind," said Kavanagh.

"Sit down, then, and have a small whisky and soda. You look tired and dusty," I said. "I shan't be long in fetching it."

We had been standing at the edge of the encampment not far from the tent which Hetty and I used as a dining-room; so calling a servant I bade him fetch the sahib a drink and a chair while I went in search of the letter.

When I returned with Kate Westerley's letter I found the young policeman with more than half his peg already swallowed, which testified not merely to the fatigues he had

undergone but spoke eloquently of the sun's power for increasing ingurgitation. The feeling of lassitude, however, was passing rapidly out of his face, and he already spoke with much of his old sprightliness of manner.

He took the letter from me and read it through without a word of comment. Then he finished the remainder of his whisky at a single draught, put the empty tumbler on the ground beside his chair, wiped his mouth with a hand-kerchief which he drew out of his sleeve, and picked up and examined the envelope of the missive rather intently.

"Seems as if this was posted in the mail train late last night. Has a queer bazaar odour about it, hasn't it?" He sniffed the letter. "I wonder where Miss Westerley gets her stationery?"

"She very likely borrowed this particular sample from the Indian station master or his assistant," said I with a laugh.

"H'm; I'm not so sure about that. I'm inclined to doubt the railway business altogether," said Kavanagh with a pursing of the lips. And then as he noticed the look of surprise with which I had received his remark—a feeling, by the way, which was caused more by the identity of his views with Hetty's than by anything else,—he hastened to reassure me. "The fact is, Sir, I think I saw Miss Westerley not quite an hour ago, only a few miles from this spot."

"Well, I do not like to be too positive about the thing until I am more sure," Kavanagh explained. "One of my men asked me to investigate the matter for myself, and we went out together at noon today. We had a very trying time of it in the sun, but, by Jove! I think the fellow is right."

"Whew!" I ejaculated, looking over my shoulder to see if by chance Hetty was anywhere within earshot. "You won't mention your suspicions to my wife, Kavanagh, I hope? she is not quite herself at present, and Miss Westerley's strange conduct yesterday rather upset her."

"No, I shall not say a word before Mrs. Claire," said Kavanagh. "Besides, mine are only suspicions as yet; I have no positive proof, and until I am quite sure it would be absurd to say anything more on the subject."

"Quite right," I assented; "in this instance we have to remember that a young lady's good name is at stake. It may be a case of mistaken identity, after all, you know, Kavanagh; so you had better go about the thing very carefully."

"I know that," said Kavanagh. "I shall be cautious. May I take this letter with me?"

"Certainly, if it is likely to be of any use to you," I replied.

"It may be; one can never tell," remarked Kavanagh as he rose to go. "I shall let you know if I discover anything fresh worth reporting."

"Yes do," said I.

"Good night," said Kavanagh, as he went off in the direction of his camp.

"Good night," I called after him.

CHAPTER XII

THE Mahadeo fair was over and the crowds that had come from far and near were already dispersing to their homes, every highway and byway being crowded with pedestrians and vehicles radiating from the temple as from a common centre. In a day or two at most it would be necessary for me to strike camp and move north again in the performance of my duties which required that I should visit all the chief towns of my district.

I had not seen Kavanagh for the preceding forty-eight hours and the casual inquiries I had made regarding him had elicited the information that the Superintendent Saheb went out very early every morning and returned to camp after dark. This seemed to indicate that the task he had set himself to accomplish so far from being a mere will-o-the-wisp, was in fact turning out successful. At any rate there seemed some prospect of success in the persistent way in which he continued his search after the truth, and this made me anxious to see him before I left the neighbourhood.

It gratified me not a little, therefore, to find that he had not quite forgotten me, for on the third day he wrote asking me if I could spare the time that afternoon at 4 o'clock to come out in my motor to the 3rd milestone from the village, as he would like my personal opinion on certain matters. This was a clear enough hint that something was impending ; so, scrawling a few lines hastily on the first piece of paper that came to hand, saying that I would be at the appointed rendezvous at the hour named, I handed the missive to the man who had brought the chit and saw him go off down the road in the direction of the railway station.

The hours of daylight were still short enough to make me reflect that 4 o'clock was by no means unusually early, if there happened to be any work doing, and that punctuality would be a courtesy I owed my young friend quite as much as myself. So I set off betimes, allowing myself twenty

minutes in which to cover the three miles I had to go in order to reach my destination ; and I was gratified to find that it still wanted five minutes to 4 p.m. when the car drew up on the public highway at the third milestone from our camping-ground.

What was even more interesting from the point of view of one like myself who was in momentary expectation of solving some mystery was that Kavanagh himself was present at the rendezvous to meet me. He was sitting on the protruding root of an immense banyan-tree complacently smoking a cigarette, as most young men do when they have nothing better to occupy their thoughts ; but he rose with a smiling "good evening" and touched the point of his helmet as the car stopped and I got out.

"Would you tell your chauffeur to stay here under the trees till you return, Sir," said Kavanagh the moment we were together. "We shall have to go on some distance farther on foot, but he need not follow us. It will be very much better if he remains where he is."

I gave the driver the necessary directions and then turned to the young Superintendent.

"We will go down the road if you do not mind, Sir," Kavanagh continued ; "we can walk in the centre here without fear of being run down. It is free from dust, and without the depressions one is perpetually finding along the cart-ruts on either side."

We set off accordingly, keeping to the centre as much as possible so as to avoid the heavy dust that forms a feature of most country roads.

"I think I told you, Sir, that I had my doubts regarding Miss Westerley's return home."

"You said something to that effect I think," I assented. "You said in fact that you were not quite sure if you had not seen her yourself that day in quite a different place to the one she had mentioned in her letter."

"Yes ; I said that, I know ;" Kavanagh agreed. "Even now I do not like to be too positive ; that is why I have asked you to come. I wish to have the confirmation of another pair of eyes besides my own—a pair of eyes, too, that have known Miss Westerley longer than mine have done."

"Well, I'm here to do the best I can to help you," said I. "What is your theory ?"

"I have no theory at present ; mine are merely surmises. I am inclined to think that Miss Westerley is being detained at the place I shall presently show you, against her will."

"You have the law on your side, Kavanagh, you know ; you can always invoke it."

"Yes ; but I do not like to make a mistake. It may turn out to be somebody else : the wife of the owner of the mansion, or daughter, or relative ; in which case my motives would be misconstrued and there would be a hell of a to-do."

"I see," said I. "One has to be extremely careful in matters of this sort, of course. But have you not seen Miss Westerley well enough to be sure you are not mistaken ?"

"I have seen her as close as you are to me, Sir ; well— perhaps not quite so close ; it may have been a yard or two farther away. Anyway she was near enough to me, or I was to her, to enable me to recognize her features. But still I want to turn assurance into certainty : I do not wish to make a mistake. That is why I have asked you to come, Sir."

During this conversation we had walked along the highway for half a mile or so, and had come within sight of a stone wall extending for some distance along the road. No entrance to the enclosure was as yet visible to us, but only the plain blank wall, nine to ten feet high, with a top-dressing of horrent glass-chips, thickly set in a mixture of mortar and cement.

"What place is this ?" I inquired as we drew nearer and nearer to the enclosure.

As far as I can ascertain this appears to be the country residence and pleasure garden of a certain Sardar Mattay, a very wealthy man by all accounts," said Kavanagh. "I have not discovered whether the Sardar is an inmate of the building just now, but I have found out beyond the shadow of a doubt that one of the occupants is the young lady we seek."

"Seems queer, does it not, that a well bred young person like Miss Westerley should have to be sought in a secluded spot like this ?" I remarked, taking careful note of the great enclosure.

"It does," said Kavanagh ; "but I suppose there are more unaccountable things in this world than most men are aware of. This seems to be one of them, though I hope to be in a position to prove whatever of mystery there may be about it in a very short while."

The Sardar's garden was not quite so close to the road as the first view of it had led me to suppose. It stood more than a hundred yards off the highway ; but an unmetalled country-track led along the wall to an entrance situated, without doubt, on the side farthest from us as we then stood. Immense as the enclosure appeared to be it still gave every

indication of being well wooded and cultivated, with an orangery, I felt sure, at the back of the building, on the side nearest the road, for the perfume of the blossoms filled the air with a grateful fragrance.

I was about to follow the country track when a gesture from Kavanagh checked me.

"We will go on somewhat farther if you do not mind, Sir," he said waving his hand in the direction he wished me to take. "I have to choose my own methods of entry into the garden, otherwise I fear I should never gain admittance to it."

He laughed a short dry laugh as he said this, from the tone of which it was easy to see that his nerves were responding to the increasing sense of danger which the situation developed.

We went on in silence the whole length of the boundary wall, some three to four hundred yards, and then, quitting the road followed the enclosure for a hundred yards or so along its eastern facet. A number of mango and other trees stood at irregular intervals in the midst of the fallow, which here stretched almost to the foot of the wall, while a gigantic banyan tree threw out its branches in all directions, even to the over-topping of the wall.

"It will be necessary to climb this giant," said Kavanagh, as he began to unlace his shoes.

"I do not mind," said I, imitating him and entering now thoroughly into the spirit of the adventure. "Having come so far I may as well go on to the bitter end;" whereat Kavanagh laughed softly.

The sun had by now sunk below the horizon amid the vermillion and gold clouds which were rapidly changing to the purple and amethyst that give to Eastern sunsets all the beauty and grandeur of a fairy pageant. Inside the garden all seemed to be at peace except where a covey of sparrows, boisterous as gamins, were disputing with each other in all the noisy babblement of a bevy of children let loose from school.

We began to climb the tree, Kavanagh going first with the ease born of previous practice, and I following more laboriously, though the branches were low which made the task comparatively easy. Standing on one of the gigantic arms that stretched out over the wall and holding on to another overhead Kavanagh made his way cautiously to the other side of the enclosure and then adroitly slipped to the ground by means of the aerial roots. I followed his example, but

before doing so was able to get a fairly comprehensive view of the interior.

Notwithstanding their extent it was easy to see that the grounds were well kept, even though a carpet of withered leaves here and there bore testimony to the activity of the solar rays during the preceding twelve hours. A belt of mango trees helped to temper the hot winds of the summer months and the cold of December, adding at one and the same time a screen of heavy foliage that partially rendered the interior of the grounds invisible from the outer circumvallation. An extensive plot was devoted to the cultivation of orange and lemon trees that were now in bloom, as I had already remarked from the sweet perfume pervading the neighbourhood, while beyond these the grounds were laid out with considerable taste for an Indian villa, grass plots and extensive beds of annuals standing in between bosky arbours and bowers formed by well-tended moon-flowers. A small artificial lake, designed more by way of ornament than use, lay at one end of the garden, and directly in front of it, though some distance off, stood a small house nestling as it were amid a wealth of foliage.

Motioning me to be as noiseless as possible in my descent Kavanagh crept forward, leaving me to follow the instant my feet touched the ground. By keeping as nearly as I could in his tracks I was able to join him in a small artificial bower which overlooked the lake; but stealthy as our approach had been it had not escaped the notice of the squabbling crowd of sparrows whose jabbering ceased with the precision of a band of trained performers only to be followed a moment afterwards by the whirr of hurried flight.

The incident checked our forward movement which the *charivari* overhead had helped to conceal: henceforward it would be necessary to be more circumspect in the manner of our approach. As we discovered not long afterwards, however the flight of the sparrows had been unremarked, or if it had been it was probably attributed to causes other than the real one, for it failed to disturb the very persons whom it was presently our purpose to observe without being seen ourselves.

A ripple of light laughter, soft as the tinkle of silver bells, was now borne in upon us, and obeying an insistent summons from Kavanagh I crept forward to his side and peered through the opening which his hand had parted in the leafy maze of creepers wherewith the place was overhung. At a distance of a hundred yards or so on a stretch of beautiful lawn lying on the farther side of the artificial lake we could see several Indian damsels disporting themselves, some singing the soft languorous airs of the East, others running about

as if in pursuit of one another, a few gathering posies of flowers. They were all uncommonly beautiful as I had to acknowledge, and dressed in the soft gossamer-like silken textures that helped well to set off the rounded fullness of their maturing femininity. But the face and form that riveted my attention and for the nonce set my nerves throbbing with unaccustomed excitement were those of Kate Westerley as I had seen her at Beldia on the night when she had come to the ball dressed as a Hindu goddess.

Yes, there could be no mistaking her at that distance, and even if sight alone were an untrustworthy witness there was the further evidence of her laughter, the cultivated tones of Western education being quite easily distinguishable from the less refined cachinnation of the East. But what on earth could she be doing there at that hour and in that costume I wondered? That there was no attempt at a disguise on her part was quite apparent, for her skin was fair as the lily, without the discolouring pigment which had tended to enhance her beauty under the artificial light of the ballroom.

She was seated on a wide cushioned swing that oscillated with the regular motion of a pendulum in obedience to the impulse supplied by the persons on it. Opposite her, with her back resting against one of the iron braces, sat a fair young girl whose features left one in no doubt as to her nationality: she had the ivory-white complexion, grey-blue eyes, and jet black hair of many among the more cultivated and refined peoples of the East Indies, and it was easy to see by the animation with which she spoke to her English companion that there was fast springing up between these two, even if it was not there already, a friendship that would outlast many of the jars so commonly fatal to earthly associations.

"Are you going home tomorrow, Miss Westerley?" asked the young girl sitting opposite, in a tone that clearly showed she was half afraid the answer was to be in the affirmative.

"Yes, Temeena," the other made reply. "I have been with you all much longer than I had first intended. I must go back to my people or my mother and father are likely to get anxious on my account."

"But you have told them that you are staying with some friends, haven't you?"

"Yes, I wrote to my mother to say that I would be away for a day or two and not to be anxious on my account as I was with friends; but the few days I meant have gone by and it is necessary that I now return, otherwise they will be sending people to look for me."

"I am so sorry," said the young girl with a slight break in her voice ; "I shall be, oh, so lonely without you."

"There are your other companions : you have Kashibai and Ganga with you. Why should you feel lonely ? "

The girl shrugged her shoulders while the corners of her mouth drooped as if she was on the point of giving way to tears.

"They will go—they will all go, as the rest have gone, I know they will ; and I shall be left alone as before."

"Do not fret, Temeena ; I shall come again to see you when you are in the other house at Somma. Is not your little Bala there ? "

At mention of the name the little child-wife could no longer withhold her tears, but drawing the corner of her saree across her eyes she sobbed unrestrainedly until comforted by her companion.

"There now, do not cry," said Kate Westerley, leaving her own seat on the swing and going across to the other whose head she gently pressed to her bosom. "You take much too gloomy a view of things, Temeena. I am sure your husband will come back in a very short while and you yourself have assured me that little Bala is being well cared for. So why should you fret ? "

"It is six months since my husband left me to go on—on this pilgrimage," the young girl replied. "I have not had a word from him since then ; not a line, and I feel so anxious. I do not know whether he is alive or dead but I always feel as if something is going to happen. If he had not told me to stay here until he returned I should never have remained. And now you wish to go away as all the rest have gone."

There was a fresh outburst of tears which the young English girl did her best to assuage.

"I will come back to see you ; I have promised, have I not, Temeena ? "

"Yes—yes ; you have been very good to me," said the girl looking lovingly at her companion. "If it had not been for you I should have run away long ago. Do you know, Miss Westerley, I feel frightened, especially after what I told you I saw here last week. Anthia Bai did not die ; I feel sure she was killed. Did I not tell you how I saw a red mark across her throat and a man carrying the blood in a large vessel ? That blood was for puja to the Shri Mata. She was killed here because she would not go to the temple. She was afraid to go to the temple."

"Hush, dear, do not let the others hear you or they will surely carry tales. See, they are coming back. Remember, I have promised to come and see you again; so do not fret."

It was true, as Kate Westerley had asserted, that the other young women who had spread themselves out over the garden were once more converging towards the swing and its occupants. Kavanagh and I had remained perfectly still within easy earshot of all that had been said, but now I began to mark a growing restlessness on the part of the young policeman. The doubts he had entertained as to the identity of one at least of the inhabitants of this strange panopticon were now set at rest by the words we had just overheard; but I question whether he was not rash in acting as he presently did, considering the means we had chosen for the purpose of gaining admission to the interior of the grounds.

Stepping swiftly round the back of the arbour whose friendly shelter had hitherto screened us from observation Kavanagh now advanced boldly towards the group of young women. There was a half-stifled scream from one of them, but the rest seemed too startled either to cry out or flee, and stood rooted to the spot, gazing in terrified expectation at the unexpected vision. Deeming it not at all unlikely that my more generous bulk would have a calming effect on a situation that promised to be full of dramatic possibilities I followed Kavanagh out of our temporary retreat, shoeless though I was.

"Good evening, Miss Westerley," said the Superintendent drawing close to the startled group. "I am glad to find you are no worse than you appear to be after your strange disappearance."

"Good evening," Kate Westerley replied somewhat frigidly, for it was plain to see from her manner that she had no taste for our intrusion. "I—I do not quite understand what you mean by my strange disappearance."

To me it was like a douche of cold water, but policemen I daresay are made of sterner stuff. It had no more apparent effect on Kavanagh than if she had told him there and then to go to the devil.

"Have you forgotten Miss Westerley, that we all promised to go to breakfast with Mr. and Mrs. Claire the morning of the Mahadeo fair, and that you disappointed the lot of us?"

"O, I recollect now," said Miss Westerley with an exhibition of embarrassment that I saw at once was due to my presence. "I am sure you will forgive me for my lapse, won't you, Mr. Claire?" she continued walking up to me and

holding out her hand which I cordially shook. "The fact is I—I had forgotten that I had a prior engagement."

Now I must say that I had always taken Kate Westerley for a good, honest, straightforward English girl, but this remark raised considerable doubts in my mind. However, I made haste to assure her of my continued confidence.

"Mrs. Claire had your letter next day, Miss Westerley, and that explained everything, I think," I remarked.

Kate Westerley blushed and, man of the world as I was, I felt I could have kicked myself for my thoughtlessness. Her letter had in fact explained nothing ; it had merely said that having been given a lift in a motor car by a strange man and finding herself at the railway station she had decided to go on home to her mother. The whole letter, indeed, had been a flat contradiction of her presence here on this day.

"I—I forgot to mention, I think, that I had gone to the fair with a certain object in view," Miss Westerley continued. "I very nearly lost sight of the purpose of my visit during my stay there, and it was only the sight of a certain object that recalled the fact to my memory."

"Captain Savage seemed very much upset about you," persisted Kavanagh with the hardihood of the young. "He was inclined to believe you had been kidnapped, I think."

"I do not look very much like one who has been kidnapped, do I ?" Kate Westerley asked in an embarrassed tone. "And now that you have found me, I am sure you will reassure him, and—and—any others who may have thought so too."

"I shall be only too happy to tell them you are safe," said Kavanagh, "though I must say, Miss Westerley, a lonely house like this would be the last place I should choose to call safe. May I know, while I am about it, if the proprietor of this establishment is on the premises ?"

"I am the proprietor," said a voice with startling suddenness just at my elbow.

I whipped round in the direction of the sound which I found proceeded from a well-dressed Indian who had the appearance of being a Brahmin, to judge by his clothes and the caste mark on his forehead. He must have been about forty-five years of age, fair skinned, grey eyed, and altogether a man of very prepossessing manners. His intonation was quite faultless.

"You are Sardar Mattay then," said Kavanagh without the faintest trace of surprise in either tone or manner, at the man's dramatic arrival on the scene.

"I am," the man acquiesced.

"I am a police officer," said Kavanagh, hoping to be impressive; "and this gentleman"—indicating me—"is the District Magistrate."

The man bowed his head in acknowledgment of the information he had conveyed. However, finding that the Sardar would say nothing Kavanagh went on:—

"I was asked to look for this young lady, Miss Westerley; and I am glad to find she is safe and sound under your roof."

Again the Sardar nodded, and then finding that Kavanagh was at the end of his verbal obliquities he obligingly helped him on to a few more.

"I suppose you would like to search my premises?" he said urbanely.

"Not at all," said Kavanagh. "Having found the object of our search and being assured of her safety my task has ended."

"May I see the search warrant?" the Sardar asked, still quite placidly.

"I'm afraid I have not brought it with me," said Kavanagh going through his coat pockets as if in search of it. "This gentleman,"—indicating me with his thumb—"will, however, vouch for me."

The Sardar accepted the explanation, though it was easy to see that it was only by a great effort he was able to suppress his annoyance. In India, however, the police and Civil Service form a combination which it would break many a stronger man than the Sardar to attempt to resist. He showed his wisdom, therefore, in bowing to the inevitable and making no bones about his violated rights.

"I shall return home tomorrow, Mr.—Mr.—Claire," said Kate Westerley, speaking in the first instance to Kavanagh, but as she seemingly failed to recall his name in time to fill in the hiatus she finished up with mine.

"That will be quite early enough for our purpose, Miss Westerley," I replied. "Our only concern was on your account."

"I am very much obliged to you for taking so much trouble," she answered, "I hope Mrs. Claire is quite well?"

"She is, thank you. And now that we have so satisfactorily completed our errand I think we will no longer intrude. Good night, Miss Westerley."

"Good night," she replied quite cheerily shaking hands with both of us.

With the single exception of the young woman we had heard called Temeena the bevy of Eastern beauties had slipped out of sight on our appearance; so raising our hats to Temeena, Kavanagh and I turned back down one of the gravelled paths which sorely tried our stockinginged feet. But we had not shaken off the attendance of Sardar Mattay as we quickly discovered.

"This way please," said that gentleman laconically, as he led off briskly towards the carriage drive.

We followed without question whither he led, knowing that it would look extremely silly, not to say undignified, for us to attempt to negotiate again the wall by which we had entered the grounds.

It was not long before he brought us to the massive wooden gates that barred entrance to these exclusive grounds, but a shout from him as we approached was answered from a neighbouring hut and the custodian appeared, a stalwart eviling man who glared at us in undisguised astonishment.

The Sardar said nothing to his servant in our presence but merely indicated by a gesture that he wanted the gate opened, and the man obeying with alacrity, threw it ajar after much clattering of bolts and bars.

"Good night," we both called back to the Sardar as we stepped out into the gathering gloom of night; but he took no notice of our greeting and merely glared at us with an expression there was no mistaking.

Once outside we set off at a brisk pace in the direction of the road. It was rapidly getting dark by now and there was little time to waste if we wished to secure our shoes and reach the car before darkness actually enveloped us.

"I did not like that fellow's looks a bit," said I to Kavanagh as soon as we had once again reached the metalled road. "There seems to be something queer about him and his house."

"Looks very much like it, dosen't it; especially after what that young woman was saying to Miss Westerley," Kavanagh replied. "I shall keep an eye on him. I shall have to see Miss Westerley again, I fear, in order to learn something about the inner economy of that establishment."

With Kavanagh's motor cycle leading the way we accomplished the journey back to our respective 'camps in ample time for dinner.

CHAPTER XIII

WE broke camp next day, Hetty returning to Beldia and I going on tour through the district. It was not long after this that I had a letter from my wife which went to show that Kate Westerley had seemingly resumed what I called her normal mode of life, for Hetty spoke of having received a visit from the mysterious Kate.

"My dear Arthur" (she wrote):—"Who do you think is now in Beldia? I am sure you would never guess, or even if you did you would be sure to pretend you hadn't. Your very good friend Kate Westerley. She called on us the other morning, walked in bold as brass, and seemed somewhat disappointed, I think, at not finding you at home! I told her you were in the district, and she exclaimed, 'What a pity!' I daresay it was, from her point of view, as she was deprived of her usual opportunity of a mild flirtation. However, I do not wish to tantalize you with what you missed by not being in the house on the occasion of her august visit.

"She had the grace to apologise, I will admit, for the trouble and disappointment she caused us the morning of the fair. She says she came there for the purpose of making certain inquiries, and that she had clean forgotten about this when she promised to come over for breakfast to our camp. You can believe as much of this little tarradiddle as you please, though I daresay it is not likely to shake your faith in the divine Kate. It was on my tongue to tell her that our appetites had not diminished one tiny bit in consequence of her absence, but refrained.

"She told me one thing, however, that I believe is true. Her engagement to Captain Savage has been broken off. I shouldn't be surprised if her strange disappearance that morning has had something to do with it; anyway she gave me very plainly to understand that Captain Savage is going home on leave very shortly, and that he hopes to get his majority in some other regiment at the end of it.

"There you are, my dear, Kate Westerley is now free once more to flirt with whosoever she has a mind to. I never took her engagement to Captain Savage seriously, and I daresay Captain Savage does not feel particularly heart-broken, now that it is at an end.

"One thing before I close : Miss Westerley has asked me to go out with her tomorrow to see someone who, she says, I am sure to like. I have agreed ; and will let you know in due course who my new acquaintance is. She (Miss Westerley) is putting up with the Petters until, I am inclined to think, Captain Savage goes on leave.

"Yours with love,
"Hetty."

A day or two subsequent to the receipt of the above letter, Kavanagh came to see me.

"I met Mrs. Claire and Miss Westerley coming out of the Heera Bagh the other morning," said the young Superintendent in the course of the conversation that followed.

"Coming out of the Heera Bagh!" said I with a frown, while unconsciously repeating my companion's words. "I suppose you know the sort of reputation attaching to the place, Kavanagh ?"

"There is no accounting for all that people say," replied the young policeman evasively. "It may be quite a respectable locality, in spite of the mystery that hangs about it."

"That's just it," said I rather testily ; "it may be respectable but we know it isn't. Are you quite sure you saw Mrs. Claire and Miss Westerley coming out of the place ?"

"I shouldn't care to swear to anything," Kavanagh said, rather lamely I thought ; "I fancied I saw the car they were in driving out of the gate."

I felt very greatly annoyed and resolved there and then to give hare-brained Kate a bit of my mind, with a request that she had better leave Hetty out of any expeditions she might be planning in the future. Kavanagh, I could see, felt uncomfortable, especially since I did not essay to answer his last observation.

"Our old friend Sardar Mattay cleared out of the country house the day following our visit," Kavanagh pursued in a very little while.

"Did he ?" said I, more by way of saying something than as if I cared a damn what became of Sardar Mattay and his belongings. The truth is, I was trying hard to think of a possible reason why Hetty should visit so notoriously ill-reputed a house as that known as Heera Bagh. Frankly, I

was puzzled ; and the state of uncertainty left me in no amiable frame of mind.

" I called round next day with a few of my men just to ascertain if Miss Westerley had gone home as she said she would," Kavanagh continued. " We had the deuce of a job getting the watchman to admit us, but eventually a couple of my chaps climbed over the wall as we had done before and opened the gate from inside. We found the place quite deserted, except for the watchman, and he was none too civil. It was only after sundry questionings, not unaccompanied by threats, that we gathered from him that the household had moved to Heera Bagh, near Beldia.

" Damn ! " I asseverated, rising to my feet in my annoyance. " What is it you propose doing next, Kavanagh ? Are you going back to Heera Bagh to keep an eye on Miss Westerley and her associates ? "

Kavanagh flushed under the insinuation implied in my words, though as a matter of fact I had never meant anything of the kind and had merely put my remark into an interrogative form in order that it might not be mistaken for a command.

" I can see no alternative," the young policeman replied. " I feel rather interested in Sardar Mattay and his crowd ever since I overheard what that young woman said to Miss Westerley."

" Quite so. Beauty in distress always appeals to the mere male, said I with a mollifying laugh which was meant to make amends for the momentary exhibition of irritation I had just displayed. By the way, Kavanagh, I am very much obliged to you for the tip about my wife. I shall drop her a line today, warning her to have as little to do with Heera Bagh and its inmates as possible."

" That was all I meant, Sir, by my visit," said the good hearted young fellow ; and Kavanagh forthwith departed taking the very next train to Beldia I have no doubt.

I was speculating next morning on the effect my letter would have on Hetty, and wondering whether she would feel annoyed at its tone, when I myself had one of the biggest, and I need hardly say, most unpleasant surprises of my life in the shape of a letter from Hetty's very self.

" My dear Arthur," (she wrote):—" I promised to write and let you know who my new acquaintance is, because I am certain you could never guess her name, even if you tried. Well, dear, you will hardly credit what I am about to tell you, though every word of it is true. Miss Westerley took me to a place called Heera Bagh, which is a couple of

miles outside Beldia and there she introduced me to a young woman who said she was Mrs. Temeena Bodh, wife of Mr. Mahadeo Narayan Bodh.

You know the man I mean, because Mrs. Bodh said her husband had been in the Indian Civil Service and knew us very well, as he had once travelled out from England in the same ship with us. I fancy he is the quiet young man who used to make up our bridge parties on board. He and Miss Westerley were great friends if you remember, but I cannot imagine what made him resign the Service—his wife says he has.

But stranger even than his resignation is his subsequent conduct. His wife tells me Mr. Bodh has become an ascetic and given up the world. All his property has been willed to some temple or other—fancy that!—subject to a life interest in it in favour of his wife and infant son. Did you ever hear of anything more unjust or absurd? It is much as if he had placed a premium on the death of both, since he has provided a powerful incentive for getting rid of them, and I must say I was not at all favourably impressed by the people with whom Mrs. Bodh has taken up her residence."

'So,' said I to myself, 'Hetty now knows something about Bodh's strange renunciation.'

It was news to me, however, to learn that the young woman whom Kate Westerley had been visiting was Mrs. Bodh. The knowledge helped to explain a good deal that appeared inexplicable in her recent conduct.

Then I went on reading the letter and if I had had reason to marvel before I was almost struck dumb with what followed.

"And now dearest, I have something to tell you which I know you will think unreasonable, not to say silly. I want to go home for a few months, until baby is born. I cannot explain why I think so, but I have the feeling that something will certainly happen to me and *him* if we remain in India. Do you remember what the old priest at the temple of Mahadeo said the other day while we were looking at that dreadful idol: 'Hail Mother, here is the boy: she has brought the boy with her.' Now how did he know it is to be a boy? and even if it turns out to be a boy, instead of a girl, what has that got to do with him?

"I do not know, Arthur, what it is, but I feel anxious. I want to get away out of this country. Do you remember what your mother said about her own life and yours? Well, somehow I fancy that what might have happened in your mother's case if she had not taken you out of the country is

going to happen in mine. Therefore I want to get away in good time.

"Now do not say I am whimsical and foolish, or that I have been scared by idle gossip, but Mrs. Bodh mentioned to me as a positive fact that she never expected to see her husband alive again. After his pilgrimage, she said, he would sacrifice himself. I asked her to explain herself, but she only cried bitterly.

"I have written to Messrs. Thomas Cook and Son to secure me a passage by the earliest possible boat. I hope you will run in for a few days to see me before I leave.

"With fondest love,
"Hetty."

Hetty going to England ! I could hardly credit my senses. I must get back home at once, I felt, and see her, even though I might not be able to dissuade her from going. After all, I argued, a few months in the old country would do her good. It would help to place the nationality of the coming stranger on indisputable grounds for one thing—a very important consideration in the official hierarchy of India.

By evening I was once again in Beldia, resolved to learn from Hetty's own lips what the real underlying reason for her hasty departure might be. On alighting from the train at Beldia station, however, the first person I ran up against was Kate Westerley herself looking bewitchingly sweet as she stood chatting irresponsibly to Kavanagh. Ho ! ha ! thought I to myself, the Superintendent is on dangerous ground.

Kate caught sight of me before I could escape unobserved and came up in her customary gushing manner leaving her companion quite unceremoniously alone.

"Why, Mr. Claire, this is most unexpectedly good," she cried walking up to me with one hand extended while the other flourished a parasol after the manner of a walking-stick. "Where have you dropped from ?"

"From nothing more prosaic than the passenger train yonder," I replied, trying to humour her. "And what brings 'e belle of Somma to the humdrum gaieties of Beldia ?"

"I'm seeking fresh adventures and pastures new, Mr. Claire. I'm on my own now, you know. You've heard of course," she said dropping her voice to an undertone, "Sid's handed me my discharge. I'm looking for another cavalier now."

"Why not try——" said I, jerking my thumb expressively in the direction of Kavanagh who was just then looking in the other direction.

Kate Westerley gave her mouth a queer little twist—a woman's way, as I have found, for saying "I'll think about it; but I don't much care if I forget."

To me, however, she said: "Is it true Mrs. Claire is going home?"

"Yes," I said; "Hetty needs a change."

"Well, it's a consolation to think she will have someone to look after her on board in case of submarines. You know, Mr. Claire, I always feel dreadfully nervous about submarines, especially after the way the Germans use them."

"There is no danger in that direction now," said I, puzzled to know whether her last remark was or was not tinged with just a suspicion of spitefulness. "Are you waiting for anyone in particular?"

"No," she said "I did not feel like having tennis at the Club this evening, so I dressed for an excursion, as you see, and strolled down to the station."

"In that case, if you are going in the same direction as myself we can walk together part of the way," I suggested as Beldia folk seldom or never indulge in the luxury of a carriage when moving about our little station.

"Come along," she cried; "I've seen all there is to see in the train, and I've nothing more to wait for. Good night, Mr. Kavanagh," she added, nodding as we passed that young gentleman.

She tripped along gaily at my side, chattering all the time.

"It's nice to be the burra saheb of Beldia," she lisped. "One hasn't even to worry about luggage."

"The station employees know me," I laughed; "they generally take charge of my baggage and see that it's all right."

"Does Mrs. Claire not know you are coming home?"

"I wired her to have dinner ready for me; but I daresay the servant she has told off to meet me at the station is taking his time about it."

"The wretches," said Kate; "they seem to take life so irresponsibly. Whatever will you do when Mrs. Claire is away?"

"I'll advertise for a house-keeper," said I quizzically, glancing up on her face. Our eyes met, and a soft pink tint overspread her cheeks. The greatest events are sometimes drawn by hairs, and many men, I have no doubt, can trace some of the most momentous actions of their lives to remarks made casually in speaking to friends or acquaintances. Whether this was so in my case time alone will tell.

CHAPTER XIV

ONE of the greatest sacrifices which residence in India involves is the surrender of home life and comforts at unexpected intervals, just when a man grows accustomed to having a wife ; and perhaps where hotel accommodation is available or the amenities of club life offer an escape from the daily drudgery of official routine one can mitigate the severities of such separations by extending the list of one's male acquaintances and devoting more time to one's club ; but such facilities are not available at an isolated head-quarter station like Beldia. Here a man has to retain the bungalow allotted him as a residence by Government and must keep up in great part the same household establishment he has been accustomed to while his wife was with him ; the only relief being when he can find a bachelor friend to share his solitude with him.

Such was my position in Beldia after Hetty's departure, only that having no bachelor acquaintance to share my solitude was constrained to dwell in solitary magnificence, eating my meals alone and deprived of the consolation of having friends at my own place. However, I made amends by spending more time at the railway institute and tennis courts than ordinarily had been the case when Hetty was here.

I had cut short my district work and returned to headquarters shortly after Hetty's departure as the unaccountable fretfulness which seizes a man in circumstances like these made it necessary that I should cultivate the society of my fellow men and women. It was not without a feeling of thankfulness, therefore, that I discovered Kate Westerley was still in Beldia, staying with her friends the Petters. Still I was not so young as to flatter myself with the pleasing delusion that beautiful Kate was dallying thus for the purpose of having a good time with a grass widower like myself. A scrupulous respect for the proprieties is unfortunately not a strong point with some women, but I must.

do Kate Westerley the justice to admit that though she could be as tantalizingly seductive as Circe on occasions, and made no attempt to conceal the fact that she was luring her victim on, I had hitherto always found her capable of exercising a marvellous control over her feelings in a way that checked undue familiarity. However, while human nature remains what it is, a man, be he old or young, will always find pleasure in the society of a pretty girl ; and I must confess that I was far from being an exception to the general rule. Kate Westerley had always attracted me, and Hetty with her acute prescriptions had not been far out in crediting me with leanings in that direction.

How time does fly ! Two months had slipped by since Hetty's departure, but already the separation, which had seemed so hard in the first few days of my loneliness, was fitting in nicely with the altered condition of things. It was now quite a frequent occurrence for me to go out for evening walks in the direction of Heera Bagh, and if I met Kate Westerley driving back from the none too reputable pleasure-house and she condescended to alight and walk back with me dismissing her trap in the meantime, who shall say that we were contravening the proprieties thereby ?

It was during one of these walks that I ventured to ask my companion how she had found her protege, Mrs. Bodh.

" Quite the same as usual," said Kate. " She puts a brave face on the whole thing, but it is easy to see that she is fretting—fretting for her little one and her husband."

" Nobody has a right to come between her and her child," said I with the authority of a District Magistrate. " She has only to apply to me if she imagines her infant is being intentionally kept apart from her, and I can enforce its restoration."

" I am quite sure you can, and I am very grateful for the kind offer implied in your words," said Kate ; " but you see the separation is being enforced on religious grounds. Mrs. Bodh believes that she must remain secluded with conventional rigidity until her husband has performed his pilgrimage. She is impressed with the idea that it would be sinful on her part to evince the usual signs of maternal love for her offspring during a period of piacular suffering, such as her husband is going through. The gods would be angry with her and punish those nearest and dearest to her—her husband and her child ; hence her renunciation, don't you see ? "

" Yes, Miss Westerley, I can see what is happening and realise how powerless I am to act without some complaint from those most affected. It is the old story, I fear, of

charlatans playing on religious sentiment for their own private ends."

"It looks very much like it, doesn't it?" Kate Westerley added with a sidelong glance in my direction.

"Excuse me, Miss Westerley," I remarked, seeing the occasion was favourable for such a question, "how do you come to be mixed up in a matter of this sort? I have been puzzling my head a good deal lately to account for your connection with the whole affair."

"That's easily explained," said Kate airily. "Mr. Bodh appealed to me to look after his wife, and I promised to do so."

"Bodh appealed to you to look after his wife," said I, somewhat incredulously I regret to say.

"Yes; there is nothing extraordinary in that, is there?" she asked with a slight raising of the eyebrows. "I met him quite by accident on the road at Somma one day. He looked like a religious mendicant and I was unable to recognize him, and we went past each other. But, then, all at once, I heard my name being called and turned round to see the mendicant following me. It gave me a start, I can tell you; but he was very respectful and apologised for addressing me on a public road. Then I saw who it was, and we had a short conversation, he saying that he would be very grateful if I would occasionally visit his wife; which I promised to do if he would tell me where she was to be found. He said he would let me know very shortly, thanked me for my kindness, and withdrew. It was nearly a month after this that I saw him again. I was then at the Cavalry Camp as you know, and walking out one morning I saw Mr. Bodh sitting under a tree, in the same hideous get-up of a religious mendicant. He said that if I visited the Mahadeo fair on a certain date a friend of his would meet me with a motor car and drive me to the place where I could see his wife. He assured me that I had nothing to fear and that his friend would answer for my safety. On that I said I was not afraid but would go and do what I could to comfort his wife. The rest, I think, you know for yourself, Mr. Claire; I have tried to do what I can for Mrs. Bodh."

"It is very good of you, I am sure Miss Westerley," said I by way of saying something of a non-committal nature, though I marvelled greatly that a girl of her seemingly frivolous nature should undertake the task of being monitor in a case more or less eleusinian in its mysteriousness. However, it is never safe to prophesy too confidently concerning a woman, especially one of the Kate Westerley type, as I learned to my cost before long.

"You would like her yourself if you knew her, Mr. Claire," continued the ingenuous Kate.

"I have no doubt I would, Miss Westerley," said I. "I am peculiarly susceptible to female charms——;" whereat Kate laughed.

"It's a good thing Mrs. Claire is not here to hear you," she pursued.

"I quite agree it is," said I, "for as the Irishman might say : Begorra, in that case, it's little ye'd see of me here to say it."

Kate laughed once more in a piquant, say it again, sort of tone that was peculiarly gratifying.

"You are not anxious to go home just yet I hope," said I, taking advantage of the favourable moment.

"Not at all," my companion replied ; "let us go for a short walk if that is what you mean."

"A walk by all means," I exclaimed ; "a walk in the open country ere 'the stars begin to blink'."

So we walked on across the unploughed fields with their cotton plants growing at irregular intervals and the cool breeze of evening fanning our cheeks. Alas ! how easy it is to forget those nearest and dearest to one after even a few months of separation. I have no wish to palliate my lapse nor offer excuses for many shortcomings my character reveals ; neither will I take refuge behind the usual subterfuge of the weak to whom human frailty is the pretext wherewith they may shift to gloss over their pecadilloes.

At length we sat down on the grassy bank of a brook which in the course of its many wanderings over hill and dale I have no doubt swells at last to the width of a mighty river. The place was thickly wooded and the stem of a mango tree served as a rest for my companion, who had slipped off her hat and thrown it over her knees.

Kate Westerley, as I have before now remarked, was a sweetly pretty girl, with all the charm and verve of manner which early contact with the world bestows on some women. She had possessed an attraction for me, in spite of Hetty's maturer beauty, from the very first day I had set eyes on her, and though marriage imposes obligations on those who undertake its solemn duties, few Benedicts in my shoes, I feel bound to confess, would have forsaken an hour's idle dalliance with Kate.

"When is Beldia going in for the luxury of another dance ?" asked Kate, as much by way of diversion as for the purpose of saying something.

"Would you have me forget Hetty altogether?" I asked with a deprecating gesture.

"Not necessarily," she replied. "Marriage broadens most men's sympathies, I think."

"It certainly teaches a man his weak points," I asserted.

"Then there is no need to inquire whether you have learnt your lesson, Mr. Claire," Kate went on in the bantering tone she generally assumed with her more intimate acquaintances.

"I hope I may lay claim to average ability, Miss Westerley," said I.

"Why, then, do you fear another dance, Mr. Claire?"

Because the goddess Kali has a way of pressing her claims on my attention that I can hardly resist. You know I am devoted to Kali from my childhood."

"Suppose we banish Kali altogether and prohibit her entry, would there still be any objection to Beldia having another dance?"

"You cannot hope to banish Kali, Miss Westerley: she would contrive to appear under the more benign guise of Uma, no doubt, but she would be there all the same."

"Well, in that case it cannot be helped, I suppose; we must chance Uma and risk your salvation."

"I daresay we must, and Hetty will have to take her chance also."

"I hope the risk won't be greater than her claims can bear," laughed Kate.

"A married man's resolutions are but as vapour in the sunshine of a pretty girl's smiles, Miss Westerley," said I, with increasing warmth of expression.

Kate Westerley glanced at me with a look full of vivid emotion which the heightening colour in her cheeks served but to intensify. "I am glad I am not a married woman then," was all she said.

We sat silent for a while, and then I reached out for one of her shapely hands which I took unresisting between both my own. The act brought us into closer contact, her shoulder resting against mine and her arm along the inside of my own. What Kate Westerley's feelings were at the moment I am unable to say, but if they resembled mine they must have been in a pretty topsy-turvy condition. However, a man takes little count of these things when his pulses are tense and his brain in a whirl with contending emotions. The touch of her warm flesh sent the blood surging through

my veins and in a moment of lunacy I stooped forward and kissed her on her lips.

She said nothing, neither did she resist, so that maddened with the intoxication of the act I kissed her again and again, and might have gone on kissing her to my own undoing for an infinity of time, had her head not fallen limply on my shoulder for a brief space.

Gently, very gently I drew it back and laid her soft young cheek wet with tears, against my own. Then gathering her lissom form more firmly in my own strong arms I drew her closer to me and kissed her with ever increasing intensity as I whispered in her ear.

"You have not kissed me as yet, dearest," I remonstrated with soft insistence. "Won't you do so—just once?"

She yielded to my entreaty and let her lips rest on mine.

Ah! What rapture is there not in a maiden's first kiss. How caressingly soft is the velvety touch of those bashful lips as they yield themselves to the endearments of the moment. The soft pulsations of the rounded bosoms, heaving in unison, the gentle breath fanning face and cheek, the intoxicating sense of propinquity—all tend to make one nuzzle nearer and yet nearer, bury oneself, as it were, in the object of one's desire.

We sat thus heedless of the passage of time, until the deepening shadows of twilight and the reek from the distant roof tops warned us that nature would presently be seeking repose. Then back again across plough and plantation we threaded our way, picking our steps over errant watercourses and through bramble patches growing ever more indistinct in the gathering crepuscle. We said little to each other, for what more was there to say, after our intimate soul-communion?

Kate Westerley, I thought, was more than usually taciturn. She suggested that we had better choose a more roundabout cut than the way we had come, and after that answered whatever remarks I made, in monosyllables.

Thus we arrived at length at Beldia just as the lamps were being lit in the houses and people beginning to get ready for dinner. I left her at the gate leading to the Petters' house, wishing her a formal "goodnight" as though she and I were no more to each other than the good friends we had hitherto always been. At what pains are we not to keep up appearances so that we maintain the world's esteem!

CHAPTER XV

IF eternity be God, and God eternity, then man's everlasting happiness or misery must surely be the result of the mental Arcadia of sublime contentment, or the Tartarus of stygian discontent, he has created for himself; else the Eternal Omniscience would be perpetually plagued by importunities from the creature he has created.

During the next few days I lived in a kind of mental Elysium, a veritable ecstasy of pleasing anticipations, conjured up by the perfervid imaginings of a man of forty.

I did not see Kate Westerley again for some time, although I made several attempts to do so by unobtrusively frequenting such places as I thought would lead to a meeting between us. She, on her part showed no disposition to hasten a reunion, and so I concluded that maidenly modesty prevented her from yielding herself too easily to the dictates of a momentary passion. It was a week or more before I learnt quite casually from young Kavanagh that she had left her friends the Petters, and was back once more with her parents at Somma. This seemed rather a facer for me, but it would never have done to let Kavanagh suspect that there had been any sort of intimacy between us. It was easy enough to see he had been smitten, as the frequent journeys he undertook to Beldia from his headquarters at the manufacturing town of Kapusgaon were eloquent testimony to the growing state of his feelings. At the same time I felt sure that he distrusted me to a certain extent; but whether this was due to the natural jealousy every lover feels for the men who are on a friendly footing with the object of his keen desire, or was the result of knowledge and observation I had no means of ascertaining. As his superior, however, it behoved Kavanagh to treat me with respect, and whatever the state of his feelings he betrayed them by no overt act, though to one like myself who was used to judging character and weighing motives it was quite apparent that the young policeman was no longer his old free and easy self.

When another week had gone by without any sign from Kate Westerley I began seriously to debate within myself whether it was not for the best after all that we did not meet. There was everything to lose and nothing to gain by persistence in the course I had permitted myself to drift into and had foolishly dragged her down to, so that prudence dictated caution. But caution is a counsel of perfection in affairs of the heart, more respected in the breach than the observance. Age certainly induces caution and I was old enough to realize the risks I was running; but, then, infatuation often blinds men to the most obvious consequences of their actions and there could be no denying that Kate Westerley had infatuated me with the witchery of her presence, with the usual result that I was ready, nay eager, to plunge headlong to perdition for her sake.

At length I could stand the suspense no longer. I must know whether she really cared for me or had merely yielded herself to the impulse of an unguarded moment. Think of it! here was I a sober-minded, steady, married man swept off my feet by the first gust of passion like a veritable schoolboy, without one shred or particle of self-constraint left to guide, admonish, or warn me of the folly of my actions. Hetty! ah yes, the thought of Hetty did occur to me but in no wise as a curb to my unrighteous passion. When has a woman's desertion of her husband in the hour of his need served to quench the fires of unholy desire? Rather the other way about, I should say; for to a mind in search of the demurelent of a valid excuse the absence at such moments of the partner of one's joys and sorrows is generally construed in the most literal sense as desertion, meriting punishment. Thus is it always, and thus I suppose will it always be: Azazel's lot falls to the absent one on whom we heap our trespasses in the hope that they may be borne out into the wilderness and forgotten. Vain paralogy. We are ever deluding ourselves into the belief that necessity constitutes justification and that man is but a weak creature, born only to err and sinning from his very inability to avoid committing himself.

I had made up my mind to go to Somma and see if I could meet and speak to Kate, for I felt piqued by her silence, when chance or fate, whatever brings these things about, threw her in my way under most fortuitous circumstances. I was going past the railway station, walking in the direction of that place of ill-repute, Heera Bagh, towards which my inclinations on several occasions had previously often led me, when, whom should I behold a short distance ahead of me, but Kate Westerley herself, tripping along lightheartedly, with the scarlet parasol I knew so well lightly resting on her

shoulder. In an instant my nerves were beating a wild tattoo, and my breath came in gasps as I hastened to catch up with her.

"Miss Westerley," I called when I was close behind and it would no longer have seemed an impertinence thus to hail her.

She turned at once, and perceiving who it was, held out her hand in cordial greeting.

"How do you do, Mr. Claire?" she said in her wonted manner and without the least indication of embarrassment at what must have been an awkward meeting to her.

"Off on your old jaunt to Heera Bagh?" I inquired, as if her destination had not been patent from the very first.

"Yes," she replied. "I had a pressing letter from Mrs. Bodh and am going to see what it is that is troubling her now."

"The same old trouble, I'll guarantee," I remarked flipantly. "Her husband has probably tired of his new vocation by now and is thinking of coming back."

"I should hardly say it's that," Miss Westerley rebuked me with a reproachful look. "You do not realize how seriously these people take such things. Mr. Bodh's action seems perfectly reasonable to his wife, though to one of us it would appear brutal that a man should abandon a young wife and infant son in the manner he has done."

"Since when have you developed your present toleration for superstitious beliefs, Miss Westerley?" I laughed, though the analogy in my own case with Hetty jarred uncomfortably on my nerves.

"I do not know," she replied cheerily. "I daresay there is a leaven of superstition in most of us, if we only knew it."

"I daresay there is," I assented, remembering nevertheless very distinctly that if it was not superstition it was something very akin to it that had driven Hetty from my side to seek refuge in flight. Well, after all, thought I, what though Hetty be gone, am I not recompensed in the possession of this girl? "Still you do not approve of Mr. Bodh's conduct, do you?" I continued aloud.

"I do not approve of it; of course not," she answered, "but it does not follow that I condemn it."

"That is a nice distinction to draw," said I. "Now suppose a man's wife left him through a superstitious fear, an altogether imaginary belief; what interpretation would you put on her conduct?"

"That depends on whether the superstition is real or pretended."

"O, it's real enough," I answered grimly.

"Are you quite sure?" she asked.

"I'm as sure as I can be of anything," said I with determination. "The fact is my wife developed the queer notion that her first-born son would be required of her as a sacrifice by some Hindu god or goddess if she remained in this country. So she fled."

"But she has no son," said Kate with no prudish attempt to overlook the fact.

"She had not then," said I; "but it is not at all unlikely she may have now."

"Oh, I see!" Kate Westerley ejaculated mystically. "Her superstition is well grounded then. How long has Mrs. Claire been entertaining this belief?"

"I cannot say," I answered. "My mother had a similar obsession, and Hetty I'm afraid has imbibed some of her ideas."

"Very likely," the young woman essayed in dubious tones that somehow seemed sarcastic to me, "and so she went off to England. You were not afraid to trust her alone on board I suppose?"—And then she added hastily before I could say anything—"But there would, of course, be many persons on board to look after her. If I had known in time I might have asked Sid to keep an eye on her."

This allusion to Captain Savage jarred excessively on my nerves as I could not say whether she meant it in jest or earnest. She was thinking of the man who had thrown her over and gone off quite suddenly in a fit of temper, I thought. But the strangest part of her present conduct, to my seeming, was the use of his pet name, and therein I fancied I could see the inconsistency of the feminine mind which is ever disdainful when run after, but becomes the passionate devotee the moment there are indications of the lover's regard cooling. The thought was gall and wormwood to me, for no man looks lightly on the rejection of his love; but how was I to overcome this feeling!

"Did Captain Savage go home in the same boat?" I ventured to inquire, although Hetty had as a matter of fact written and told me of his presence on board.

"I thought you knew that he had secured an exchange and wanted a holiday before joining his new regiment." Kate Westerley replied rather ambiguously.

"I did hear something of the sort," said I, not wishing to dwell too insistently on a topic that must be disagreeable to her.

"Captain Savage ought to be back again in India by now," she pursued, regardless of my skimping of the subject." Mrs. Claire has perhaps written and told you if she intends coming out herself."

I ignored the insinuation. A man who wishes to stand well with a young and pretty girl has to overlook many little oddities of speech and character.

"Hetty, I'm afraid, has gone away for good," I remarked with a sigh that was not quite involuntary.

"Indeed," she replied ; "no breach between you, I hope."

"None that I know of. She wishes to stay with her people until the boy has grown up : I must remain out here, as my work lies in this country."

"So you have a son, then, after all ?" she remarked, "let me congratulate you," and she held out her hand.

"I haven't heard from my wife for some time now, so I cannot say for certain," I replied lamely. "I daresay things are all right, though, as I should have been informed had matters not gone smoothly."

"Poor neglected man !" she laughed, recovering her composure. "Whatever will you do with yourself ?"

"I know what I should do if I had my choice," I said gazing with admiration into her eyes.

She averted her face and then replied with a negative shake of the head : "No, no---there must be no more of that fooling. I lost my head that day, and I suppose you did so too. But it must never occur again."

"Why not ?" I asked boldly, putting my fate to the test.

"Because I can never marry you," she said.

"Why not ?" I asked again. "My wife can secure a divorce."

"No, no," she went on with a determined switch forward of the parasol. "Do you think I would marry a divorcee? ---Never,"—and I just caught the flash of angry scorn that accompanied her words.

"I did not know you held special views on---on the subject of marriage," I ventured diffidently.

"They are not special views," she corrected, "they are what every educated English girl is taught nowadays at school, or if she is not taught, at all events she ought to be."

"If your views were to prevail to any extent there would be no need for our divorce laws," I said in the vain hope of convincing her that there might be other ways of looking at this complex problem of the relations of the sexes.

"The divorce laws are a necessary evil, and we have to put up with them," she admitted in her most didactic manner. "Human nature is frail, especially feminine nature; but that is no reason why we should pander to the erotic tendencies of a dissipated age?"

Great Scot! thought I to myself, have I in my innocence been tackling one of the champions of women's rights, one of the strongholds of the "equality of the sexes" movement. Here was a nice to-do. What a position for one of the up-holders of the British Empire in the East to find himself in: actually defending the laws of his country against the assaults of a girl scarcely out of her teens! However, we live and learn.

"What is a man to do whose wife has left him!" I asked in a chastened mood.

"What a woman has to do in similar circumstances: try and forget," she replied without a moment's hesitation.

"Don't you think it would aid oblivion very greatly if he were to fill her place with another?" I queried in my most insinuating tone.

"He has no right to spoil another woman's life in order to improve his own," she said severely.

"But it would not be spoiling the other woman's life if he got legally married to her, would it?"

"It might," she said with all a woman's sophism. "Suppose the first wife wanted after a time to come back to her husband?"

"Ah!" said I, quite thrown off my guard by this novel method of reasoning; "but—well—suppose, the first wife had also got married in the meantime to someone else?" I continued with a burst of enlightenment.

"No minister of religion would marry a divorced person," she said with decision.

"But they might contract a civil marriage; the law allows them to," I suggested apologetically.

"Civil marriages are no marriages!" she said with almost fierce scorn. "They are—are—merely a licence to live together. What the law joins together the law can put asunder."

"Of course," I conceded ; "and that would make it quite easy for the first wife to return to her first husband if she wanted to. They need only get divorced again."

"And what about the second wife and second husband?" she asked.

"Ah!" said I, rubbing my chin with the hand that was disengaged ; "the second wife and other husband is the problem.—How really nice it would be if the second wife and other husband were to make up their minds to get married like sensible people."

There was just the faintest suggestion of a titter, whereby I judged that her mood had softened.

"Such a course as you suggest, if generally acted upon, would reduce society morals to—to—rather a primitive state, wouldn't it?" she smiled up at me.

"Your reservation is very appropriate," I conceded. "If generally acted upon it might be disintegrating in its promiscuous tendencies ; but then, you see, there are always enough simple married folk in this world who are content to jog along in the old style."

"You mean without recourse to the divorce courts?"

"Yes, without recourse to the divorce courts."

"You do not count yourself one of the simple ones I can see quite easily, or you would not have suggested abandoning your wife to her fate just now," she went on looking steadily ahead.

"When one tastes of the tree of knowledge the experience is apt to be a little unsettling ; don't you think so?" I asked, facing her with the old query in a new form.

"It is at first," she allowed somewhat reluctantly. "But it does not necessarily follow that we ought therefore to jump to extremes at once."

"I quite admit that difference in methods," said I. "Some men glide into iniquity ; others fall headlong downwards. Whether there is anything to choose in either method of progression is a matter for the philosopher, not for the everyday worker."

"Still we have to give the matter our best consideration, when it touches our own lives ; so much depends on making a right decision."

This came in the nature of a revelation to me.

"So you too have been pondering the question, Kate?" I asked, permitting myself the use of her Christian name for the first time.

A deep flush overspread her features but she faced me bravely as she replied : "Do you think I was not justified in asking myself whither such conduct as ours would lead to if persisted in ? Was I not justified in asking myself whether it would be right and proper to break up another woman's home ?—whether I might not get a better opportunity by waiting ; whether, in short, the game is worth the candle ? "

Her sudden vehemence and candour were startling in the extreme. Her thoughts, then, had been taking a course similar to my own. She had been catechising herself on the same subject, it would appear, and had probably come to some decision. But what was that decision ?

" You were right to think out the question as you appear to have done," I remarked quietly. " I have given the matter most serious thought myself."

" And what decision have you come to ? " she jerked out the sentence with an effort that indicated clearly the agitated state of her feelings.

" I have come to the decision that it is not right for a man in my position to live alone in this country, and that since my wife will not live out here and I cannot possibly leave my present work and live elsewhere with her, the best thing we can do is to ask the law to disunite us."

" Has Mrs. Claire expressed any wish to change her name ? " she intervened with flashing eyes.

" I—I—I—cannot say she has said so in definite terms," I replied rather uncertainly. " She has left the decision entirely to me."

" That is to say she is quite prepared to give you your release, if you want it ? "

" As far as I understand."

" You still love your wife, I suppose, Mr. Claire ? "

" Well—yes, in a way I do ; but you know since that day—."

" I do not want to hear anything about that day," she interrupted me with a gesture of her small gloved hand. " I was mad on that day and—and I daresay you were also."

" But—but you said—you loved me," I suggested.

" I know I did ; I know I did "; she cried vehemently ; but it was all madness ; the folly of a moment. My feelings were overwrought."

" And so you've changed your mind ? " said I as soberly as I could.

"I've changed my mind," she assented. "I've seen the folly of my conduct in time, thank God; and I hope to draw back."

"And what about me?" I asked. "Have you no consideration for me? Am I to be left stranded alone? Is my life to be blasted just when I thought happiness so near?"

"You have your work," she replied more calmly than she had yet spoken. "You have the possibilities of a great career before you. Why wreck them by so precipitate an action?"

"Bah! my career!" I cried bitterly. "Of what avail can a brilliant career be to any man when he has no one to share his joys or sorrows with him? Who cares a straw for all the world's honours in comparison to the love of a good woman. And"—I added more softly—"Kate you are a good woman and I love you; you are the woman I want!"

"No," she said, motioning me off with her hand, though her voice sounded strangely hollow. "Do not tempt me any more, Mr. Claire; I am only a woman, and weak. Leave me alone; let me live my own life. I honour you for your declaration; I value your friendship. Let us always remain friends. We can be nothing else. You have your wife and little son living: cherish their memory, even though they may not be with you. Who knows whether they may not yet come out to stay with you."

"Is this your final answer, Kate?" I asked sadly, for I felt both sad and humiliated.

"Yes; that is my final answer," she said, averting her head for a moment. "Good-bye, Mr. Claire." She held out her hand, trying in vain to smile through her tears.

"Good-bye," I said touching her hand lightly.

We had been standing during the last few minutes not far from the gate of the country-house known as Heera Bagh towards which Kate Westerley turned the moment our interview had concluded. I watched her as she walked the few yards to the entrance, and when she had turned the corner and was lost to view I faced about for home.

No man had ever received his *conje* more decidedly than I had that day, I reflected as I made my way back in a frame of mind that can only be described as chaotic.

CHAPTER XVI

If the sins of fathers be visited on their children to the third and fourth generations how often do we not experience in ourselves the nemesis that folly draws as the result of its own actions. It may be that the punishment has been long in preparation and the course of events that is to operate as the corrective or chastisement of our misdeeds has been set going even before we have had thought or intention to transgress as we have done ; yet who can say that the omniscience of the Creator has not designed to His hand the means whereby the corrective shall be applied, and ordained the exact moment when retribution shall commence ?

In this light at least was I disposed to regard some of the events that followed my latest aberration.

During the course of the next few days I was the recipient of two long and interesting letters from Hetty. They had been written at a fortnight's interval and their arrival within so short a time of one another can only be accounted for on the supposition that the first had failed to catch the Mail Steamer it was destined for, while the second came on by the extra mail that occasionally supplements the ordinary service.

This was how Hetty described the life she had been leading since settling down with her mother, her ideas regarding her duty to me her husband, and her intentions for the future in so far as she could forecast them with any degree of certitude :

My dearest Arthur,

Richmond, 7th April.

It is nearly two months now since I had a letter from you, so I conclude you are still fettered by the old determination to regard my decision to stay some time longer in this country from the point of view of self-interest. Of what advantage, you ask, is it to have a wife who is resolved to live in England while the life work of her husband lies

thousand of miles away in India ? Well, dearest, I shall not attempt to answer your question of vantage or disadvantage from the point of view of either of us, because nothing I can urge is likely to change your present mood as far as I can see. My answer must still, therefore, be the old one—that you have the right to choose your own way of release if you are so minded. I have told you before and I repeat it again that I shall not stand in your way should you desire your freedom.

But before you do anything rash, dearest, let me conjure you for baby's sake, if not for mine, to reflect on your course of action and its probable consequences. I have told you why I wish to remain in England until baby grows to boyhood. You call it superstitious folly. You may be right; but still, dearest, you do not realize what a mother's feelings are in a matter of this sort. Ah ! dearest, you do not know what a little cherub Cyril is ; what a source of joy unspeakable to me ; what a dear darling pet I find him. How could I think of leaving him here all by himself and his fond mummy thousands and thousands of miles away ? It would break my heart to do so. Arthur ! Arthur ! cannot you see things as I do ?

'Bring him with you to India' I hear you say. 'Surely other women have their babies with them ?' I know they have ; but no parallel can be quite the same which ignores the differences in the circumstances surrounding the birth of Cyril and those of other children. The occurrences preceding and following your own birth were in themselves sufficiently peculiar to justify your mother in acting differently from other women ; and now that we have had abundant proof that the vow made by your mother is still binding on her grandson, I do not see why my son should be exposed to any greater danger, while he is young and incapable of defending himself, than you were before you came to years of discretion.

(“The deuce !” said I. “Hetty surely does not hold me responsible for her own silly whims ? Great Scot !—How two otherwise sane women like Hetty and my mother could become obsessed by such a strange notion as that the son of one or other of them is doomed to offer himself a sacrifice in fulfilment of a supposititious vow passes my understanding. Well—well—woman is an enigma without a doubt !”—with which easy solution of the problem I turned to the further perusal of Hetty's letter.)

So much as regards the question of my early return to India. Let me tell you something now about the quiet life I have been leading here with mother, ever since baby was born. It will help you, dearest, to understand that it is not

my own ease and enjoyment I seek in remaining in this country.

We have had very few visitors up to the present. Doctor and Mrs. Stapleton come over frequently, as they have known mother and myself a great many years ; but for the rest the only new acquaintances we have made are Mrs. and Miss Sefton Ford, who were in India but have now settled here. They are living on the opposite side of the street and drop in of an evening for a game of bridge and a chat.

Last week for the first time since my coming here I had a visit from Major Savage. He asked very kindly after you, wanted to know how it was you had not yet come home on leave, and remarked how fine a boy Cyril was growing. Dearest, how everybody admires baby ! He is such a dear, sweet little chap—and, oh how like you he grows every day. Why don't you come home for a few months, Arthur dear, and see him yourself ?

Major Savage has asked me to go for a few months with his mother and sister to Bournemouth. I need a change, he says, and the sea air will do baby a world of good. It is so very kind of him to put himself out on our account that I feel deeply grateful for his offer. I am sure Cyril will benefit by a month at the seaside, though I wish mother were going with us too. But then, as it will be necessary to take a nurse with us, mother cannot well form another of the party. Since we shall be leaving in a day or two I thought I had better write and tell you, so that you might know where to address your next letters.

Before then let me hope you will have changed your mind and be here in time to take baby and myself back to mother.

With fondest love from all of us,

Still ever your affectionate
Hetty.

The other letter was as follows :—

Dewhurst Bournemouth,
April 23rd.

Dearest Arthur,

Baby, nurse, and I have been in Bournemouth a fortnight and already the change seems to be doing Cyril a world of good. Mrs. and Miss Savage are both very nice people and the latter has taken quite a fancy to Cyril and won't let him out of her sight whenever I am not by. I have met quite a lot of new people since I came here. We drive out every evening and sometimes spend hours at a stretch on the sands. Then there is the theatre. Why, I do declare I was never so

frivolous in my life before. But, then, we would not have been here had it not been for the kindness of Major Savage. I feel that we owe him a great deal for the pleasure this trip is giving us. What a pity it seems that he should have thrown away his affections on a jade like Kate Westerley. I am quite sure she never really cared for him and was only leading him on to a declaration in order to make the greater fun of him afterwards. He can see the thing in its true light now, thank goodness, as he told me only the other day that his engagement to Miss Westerley was a mistake; he feels it would have been a mistake on his part to have married her, and he is glad now it did not end that way. He feels, moreover, he never really loved her as a man should love the woman whom he means to make his wife.

I said I was quite convinced from the very first that Kate Westerley would not be a suitable life's companion for a man like him. She is a vain, frivolous, brainless thing, with no more heart where a man is concerned than one would expect to find in a kitten.—There now, don't grumble, I know you like her yourself.

Major Savage quite endorses my opinion. He says he never realized what a really good and noble married couple could be like until he came to know you and me. ("Ha!" cried I aloud when I had come thus far in the perusal of the letter, "the noble Savage is determined to improve the shining hour. He will presently drop me altogether or allude to me only as the absent beast! see if he doesn't!")

I know, dearest, you have a soft corner in your heart for Kate Westerley and will not agree with what I have just said—(Hetty's letter went on).—You always were a little frivolous in your admiration of women and have a special partiality for young girls.—("Great Scott! since when has Hetty discovered all these admirable traits in my character!") You see, dearest, I know you like a book and I find on comparing notes with Major Savage that he is quite of the same opinion as myself, though he thinks there is something to be said in excuse for you, as Kate Westerley is rather an exceptional girl.—("That is one for yourself, eh, gentle Savage?") I mentally perpended. "I shall presently be commended for having selected such a fine woman as Hetty as my wife, and for then handing her over to the tender mercies of the savage barbarian. Whew! what a fool a good woman can be at times—.")

Now, dearest, do not get jealous and say I ought to know better as a married woman than to go about flirting with an unmarried man. I am not flirting with Major Savage. We are just two good friends, two chums if you will have it so, but nothing more. He takes me out to the theatre or for an

occasional drive because his mother is more or less an invalid and his sister will not leave her side for longer than she can help. He is, therefore, forced to ask me to accompany him, though I feel sure he would very often prefer to go out alone.

There now, dear, I have told you all that there is to tell and in return I shall look for a good long letter from you. Give Kitty my love and tell her I am not a bit jealous that she has you all to herself. She is welcome to you if she can keep you, which I should be very much inclined to doubt. She is not your style and you are not hers.

Write and let me know if you still desire your release, dear. I shall not stand in the way of your happiness as I have all along said.

Baby sends you much love and many kisses.

Ever your affectionate
Hetty.

These two letters of my wife's were of so contradictory a character in much of their contents that they were rather a puzzle to me for some time. Was Hetty concealing anything, I asked myself, or did the frivolous indifference of her style cover a latent desire to break away and have done with me? It was quite possible that association with Major Savage blinded her to the perilous realities of her own position and rendered easier the transition from what constituted licit to illicit love. But then Hetty—the Hetty of my married life—was ever so different from the Hetty of these letters: the gentle, kindhearted motherly Hetty of my everyday knowledge and the careless indifferent, pleasure-seeking Hetty who seemed to underlie these epistles were as far asunder as the poles. At least so it seemed to me; but then, how easy it is for a man to deceive himself, especially with regard to his wife!

These letters added to the growing restlessness that had seized upon me ever since my encounter with Kate Westerley. At such times men do some foolish things, but whether that entitles them to the palliative of an excuse rather than the castigation of a well merited censure it is not for me to determine. All I know is I have since come to look upon my actions as extremely foolish and meriting a greater amount of reprehension than they received.

My dearest Hetty, (I wrote while yet the malaise was strong on me)—I was very pleased to see from your letter how well you and baby are thriving at Bournemouth. The sea-air of most watering places has a wonderfully vitalizing effect and I have no doubt you are likely to benefit very considerably by the change.

But as I have told you already it would be as easy to find the improvement you speak of in this country as elsewhere. The climate is not half as bad as some people are disposed to make out when it suits their purpose to decry it; and you have your own experience to corroborate the fact that you never had any cause to complain of it during all the years you shared my life out here. As regards the little one, of course the case is somewhat different; but even in his case you have the hills to which you can always go in the summer. I have told you before, dearest, and I repeat it again, a married woman's place is beside her husband, and any other arrangement can only end in disaster to both, or at all events in a weakening of the marriage tie such as cannot otherwise be regarded than as a disaster.

I leave the matter entirely in your hands to dispose of as you think best, but I would implore you, dear, to reflect on all the hardships you inflict on me when you break up my home and leave me to a life of single-blessedness without the consciousness of the freedom which bachelorhood confers on a man. Reflect for a moment on the blighting effect such action as yours must have on my career, for, after all, say what you will, a woman is the backbone of many a man's success in this country, especially a woman such as you are, dearest Hetty. I say this without qualification, for I am deeply sensible of the nine years of unclouded happiness that were mine with you as my companion. Ah! dearest Hetty! will nothing make you change your mind?

People are sure to blame me, I know, when they discover that you do not intend to return to India. It is their nature to impute all manner of unkind things to the husband in a case of this sort. But are you likely to escape being smirched in the general muddling that ensues? Only the other day I had a letter from Towner in which he asked kindly after you and baby and wanted to know when you both were expected back, as his wife was longing to pay us a visit. Poor old Towner! he little knows or suspects what is wrong in this household. Try and reflect, dearest, what Rachel Towner's feelings will be when she learns the truth. Will she again send her love and that of little Cissy, with plenty of kisses for baby, as she now does, when she guesses at the tragedy underlying our lives?

I am sure, dearest, when you think of these things, and then reflect on your present associations with Major Savage you will see that howsoever innocent you may be, the world will still not acquit you. It seldom does spare those of your sex who happen to transgress the conventions, and though at present you may be utterly unconscious of wrong-doing, that it is a transgression of the accepted order of things for a

married woman who does not intend returning to her husband (for the present at all events) to be seen going about with another man, goes without saying.

Well, dearest Hetty, I have told you what my thoughts and feelings are on the subject. It only remains for me to assure you of my continued love for you and the boy if you choose to return to me. You have never had cause to complain of my treatment in the past I think, so that it would seem superfluous for me to add any further assurances for the future. Still, need I tell you how much I long to hold my little son in my arms, or how it grieves me to think that a foolish whim should threaten to cloud the lives of the three of us to our utter undoing.

Hetty my love, I implore you to come back to me.

Ever your affectionate
husband,
Arthur.

If any one finds it difficult to reconcile the state of mind of Hetty and myself to one another in face of the expressed desire of each for a continuance of the marriage ties let him but recollect the many difficulties that surrounded our position and then try and solve the problem for himself. Here was I with more than half my period of service counting towards pension already completed, and no prospect of leave before me for some time to come. On the other hand there was my wife who refused absolutely to stay in India so long as our little son was in need of her protection, because of a silly notion she had conceived from my mother that that son was likely to be in danger if kept here. How was I to act? In the first place I was already past the age when a man might reasonably hope to be able to begin life again in another land and under different conditions. Hence I think it would have been absurd to sever the Gordian knot of my marital difficulties by sacrificing the years of service I had already given to the Indian Government. In the second place I might confidently look forward to another fifteen years of service in India, by which time I should very probably be at the top of my profession with a corresponding improvement in my status financially. Would I have been wise in the circumstances to have allowed my wife's scruples to prevail and thus bring my work prematurely to an end?

It was late at night when I finished my letter to Hetty, but the train of thought still lingered with me as I sat out in the verandah smoking. I could not help dwelling on the happiness that was denied me in the possession of my wife and child, all through the whimsical notion instilled into a highly

strung sensitive woman like my dear mother and an equally imaginative creature like my wife.

I must have fallen asleep in my chair and dreamed, because I fancied Hetty had come back to me and was sitting on the arm of the chair in the manner that was usual to her when there was anything of an intimate nature she desired to communicate.

"Get rid of that woman, Arthur," she was saying, "get rid of her, Arthur, and baby and I will come back."

"Where is she? I asked. "I cannot see any woman."

"There, cannot you see how she puts her tongue out at us?" said Hetty. "She is mocking me; I know she is. Get rid of her."

I looked in the direction Hetty was indicating and saw before us the dreaded figure of Kali. She was glaring at me with those same wide open, baleful eyes of hers that I had seen at the temple, her mouth was agape, and a hard, cruel expression as of triumph was on her features.

"Get out of this at once—begone," I cried in low, guttural accents, for fear seemed to grip me by the throat and clog my every action. I struggled to free myself from the overpowering sense of helplessness that fettered my will and paralysed my movements—"Get out!" I cried as I strove to rise. With that I awoke.

The cigar had slipped from between my fingers and was lying on the floor beside my chair with a splotch of ash beside it. It was quite cold, by which I guessed I must have been asleep some little time. The butler had put out the lamps in the drawing-rooms and verandah and shut up the house without disturbing me.

I rose from the chair and went to my bedroom which opened on the verandah. The timepiece on the dressing-table pointed to five minutes after midnight as I began to undress for bed.

CHAPTER XVII

ONE of the principal departments controlled by the District Magistrate is the police which forms the sensory nerve whereby the administrative brain is apprised of whatever is going forward in the great underworld outside the immediate purview of the controlling authorities. Every event of more than ordinary importance is thus known, and should it be deemed necessary to acquaint the District Magistrate with it, a report in writing generally follows, or else a personal interview by the principal police officer, with a request for orders, should any such be needed.

It will be seen from this how it came about that a few days later I found myself in possession of the following confidential report sent in by John Kavanagh, the Superintendent of Police :

The undersigned presents compliments and begs to submit herewith a report by Sub-Inspector Daknee regarding certain matters he was deputed to investigate. Orders are requested as to the further steps that may be deemed necessary.

(Sd:) John Kavanagh,
D.S.P.

(Report by Sub-Inspector Daknee)

According to the verbal instructions given me by your honour I beg respectfully to report that I kept the pleasure house known as Heera Bagh under my observation during a fortnight and state herein what I discovered.

On the night of the full moon Sardar Vaze Mattay held *bajans* (sacred songs) in the small temple which adjoins his house in Heera Bagh grounds. With the help of the gardener, who is my friend, and whose assistant I am supposed to be, I was allowed to be present at the *bajans* which lasted till midnight. There were also present three *pujarees* from outside, one *pujaree* from the temple of

Mahadeo near Gosai Ghat, one Kashinath Ghorpade *gossavi*, likewise of Gosai Ghat, and one Ganoo Gopal, *bampta, ramooshee* to Sardar Vaze Mattay.

When it wanted five minutes or so to midnight the music and singing of *bajans* was stopped and a small goat was led in for sacrifice to the Durga (Kali). The goat had a chaplet of marigolds round its neck, small rings of the same flowers round its feet, and a daub of turmeric on its forehead, denoting it was for sacrifice. Kashinath Ghorpade, *gossavi*, then repeated mantras while Ganoo Gopal made sacrifice of the goat before the small silver image of the god Siva which is in this house-temple, beneath a somewhat larger figure of Durga.

The blood of the goat was caught up in a brass basin by one *pujaree*, and after it had been killed the man Kashinath Ghorpade took blood on his little finger, anointed the god and goddess's foreheads, then put a finger-point of blood on the forehead of every one present, repeating sacrificial prayers as he did so.

While this was going on a serving-woman brought in a baby boy and stood by the door.

Sardar Mattay then said to Kashinath Ghorpade, *gossavi*: "This is the boy destined to be the sacrifice to the great Shri at the next festival. Anoint him also with the blood that he may be acceptable to the Mother."

On this Kashinath Ghorpade took the boy in his arms from the serving-maid and seating him on his knee, passed his hands over his head, saying : "Accept, O Devi ! this offering at our hands and spare us further visitations of thy vengeance in the shape of most death-dealing plague, small-pox, cholera, and other dire ills. O Mother of the vengeful eyes and blood-thirsty mouth, behold we offer thee this innocent child as an atonement for all transgressions of thy faithful servitors. Be graciously pleased to accept the gift which we here vow to thy service in the presence of thy husband, the great Siva, lord of the universe!"

With that he anointed the child's forehead with the blood of the goat and taking the chaplet of marigolds from the dead animal's neck, hung it round that of the child.

Just then a young woman rushed into the apartment and angrily snatched the boy out of the arms of the old *gossavi*, demanding to know what they were doing to her son.

"Nothing, Bai, we are only praying that he may become a great and good man like his father," Kashinath Ghorpade answered.

"Why have you put blood on his forehead then?" she cried, her eyes flashing fire as she pointed to the tiny spot of blood between the child's eyes. "What is the meaning of that blood, and why these flowers round his neck? Do you think to make of him a sacrifice like his father?"

"Nay, Bai, do not be disturbed about trifles," Sardar Mattay here interposed. "We do not intend hurt to the child, for is he not the son of my great and good friend, Mahadeo Narayan Bodh, the chosen disciple of the great Shri? Think you we would do ought to injure the flesh and blood of one who stands so high in the favour of the Mother —one who has devoted his whole life and property to her service?"

"Why, then, have you put blood on his forehead?" the mother persisted, for I guessed now that this must indeed be the mother of the boy. "Why have you put blood on his forehead? answer me that," she cried, her eyes glittering with the passion of a tigress as with quivering finger she pointed at the tell-tale spot. "Why have you put devotional marigolds round my child's neck?"

No one made answer, for truth to tell, all were seized with mortal fear by the suddenness of her entry and the fierce anger with which she assailed us.

"Ah, I know," she cried in agonized tones. "I can guess all. Fool that I have been not to see through your wiles these many weeks and months. Ah! but I see everything plainly now—There take your flowers," she exclaimed as with a dexterous twist of the fingers she snapped the chaplet from the child's neck without hurting it and flung it straight at the images on the pedestal. "We do not want your flowers, we want nothing of you. May you all perish miserably! May your mothers be—."

She turned, quick as lightning and was out of the room ere she finished her sentence before any one of us could divine her purpose.

"Seize her! detain her!" shouted Sardar Mattay springing to his feet, as did all of us the moment she had gone.

They rushed out after her, hoping to catch her ere she got out of the corridor leading from the temple to the house, but she was too quick for them, and with an agonized scream she darted out of the corridor and into the densely wooded garden. Then in and out of the patches of moonlight she ran, tripping over flower-beds, stumbling against plants, falling down and springing up again with loud piercing screams, on and on she ran, her child clasped close to her bosom.

We followed as best we could, the Sardar gesticulating wildly and calling on us to stop her, the *pujarees*, who were mostly old men, uttering the name of Mahadeo as they tripped here and there in the dark corners and then halted to regain their breath, the gardener and myself going more slowly and warily by reason of our better knowledge of the ground and its many pitfalls.

But the young woman sped on. It was clearly her intention, I could see, to gain the back of the house where the servants' quarters were; but whether it was for the purpose of taking refuge in one of the rooms or not I could not at the moment say. Anyway I determined to follow to see what would happen and render her any assistance it might be in my power to give.

Just then I became aware of the figure of a man running rapidly ahead of me. It was Ganoo Gopal, the *ramooshee*, who being young and athletic and well acquainted with the grounds about the house was gaining at every stride on the flying form ahead. The sight nerve me to action, and casting off the cloth I had till then held wrapped closely about my head I dashed after him with all the speed I was capable of.

The woman saw him, I think, almost at the same instant that I did, for with a scream I saw her dart behind some buildings and make for a point where, by the frequent passage of servants, the wall had been worn down. It was at this same spot that I daily made entry into the grounds, as it saved me the necessity for a lengthy trudge round by way of the entrance. That the young woman should have known of this passage argued a previous inspection of the wall, very probably with a view to a contingency such as now actually occurred.

As I have said before, the woman on catching sight of Ganoo Gopal darted round some outhouses. By this stratagem she gained several yards, as Ganoo Gopal lost sight of her, since it did not enter his dense pate that she would in all probability make for this rift in the walls as the only means of securing her liberty at such an hour. The *amooshee* as a matter of fact thought that she had gone into the motor garage and went there to look for her while I, surmising her real purpose, made for the opening and saw her scramble over the broken section of wall ere I came up.

However, it was but natural that a woman in such straits as she was in should take every pursuer for an enemy, and so observing me some yards behind her she screamed in affright and strove to increase her speed. That cry was rather unfortunate as it served only to disclose her where-

abouts to Ganoo Gopal sooner than might otherwise have been the case, for I had hardly scrambled through the broken portion of the wall than I heard the laboured breathing of the young man close behind me.

"Stand back Ganoo Gopal Bampta!" I cried endeavouring to bar his way. "Do not interfere with the woman; let her go her way." My breath came in short gasps as I spoke, since I, too, had run fast.

For a brief interval he checked at my words, but then, saying his master had ordered her to be brought back, he started off again.

I darted after him and thrusting an arm in front to check his career said in warning tones: "Beware, Ganoo Gopal! I am a Police Officer, and can take you into custody." But he gave no heed to my words, and eluding my grasp darted ahead of me, as he is younger by several years than myself and so more nimble of foot.

By this time, however, the young woman was a couple of hundred yards from the opening, running across the rutted ground that hereabouts leads to Heera Bagh. That she must be caught before long I knew to be a certainty, since with such a runner as the young *ramooshee* behind her it would have been well nigh impossible for her to escape. I therefore resolved to exert my authority to its fullest extent, and since it was useless to hope for assistance if I blew my whistle in such a lonely locality, drew out the revolver I had taken the precaution to conceal in my waist-cloth and prepared to use it should necessity arise. It was unloaded, but that did not matter, as the sight of even an empty revolver has a sobering effect on even the most obstreperous prisoner.

Ganoo Gopal had already out-distanced me by fifty yards or more. He was rapidly gaining on the woman, and must be up with her in a few score yards at the most. I tried my hardest to increase my speed, but could not go faster, being already spent and well-nigh exhausted. At most I felt I should be in time to prevent his taking the woman and her child back with him.

Pursuer and pursued were now within a few yards of each other, as I could see by the flashes of moonlight on their white clothing. The mother must have heard his footfalls behind her, must have caught the sound of his heavy breathing, for in a moment she turned at bay, deposited her child on the ground, and with a bound like a tigress had literally sprung to meet him, and grappled with him.

With a cry of agony that was more like the yelp of some animal in mortal pain I beheld the strong young man stagger back a step or two and then fall backwards. A series of

howls rent the stillness of the midnight air as with maddened blows the *ramooshee* strove to beat off his infuriated antagonist. Vain had been his efforts had I not then come up in time to release him. With both legs entwining his body, her teeth buried in his cheek, and her slender hands compressing his throat the mother fought for her young one, and strong man as he was I verily believe that that hour had been Ganoo Gopal's last had I not by main force, coupled with gentle persuasions, torn the woman from her victim.

"Do not be afraid, Bai, I am your friend. I shall not let him touch you. Do not be afraid. He will not take your child," were the words I used as I got them apart.

Ganoo Gopal rose trembling to his feet and wiping the blood from his cheek with the palm of one hand gazed for a moment in silence at the evidences of the injury he had received.

"Ganoo Gopal Bampton, I have warned you already that I am a Police Officer and shall take you into custody if you molest the woman and her child," I said to the man. "Go your way and leave her to go hers."

"She is my master's mistress and I have orders to bring her and the child back," answered the young man truculently, taking a step in the direction of the woman.

"She is not your master's mistress and the child is not his," I replied interposing between them. "Beware how you act. I am armed and will shoot."

But the young fellow's blood had apparently been roused by the opposition he had encountered, for he seemed in no mood to submit. Instead, therefore, of desisting he made a dart to where the child had been deposited on the ground and might have reached it had I not rushed at him and flung both arms about him, pinioning his arms. With that we began to struggle. With a smart jerk he released himself and seizing me by the waist threw me backward as a wrestler does, whereon he planted himself on my chest.

He is a brave fellow, is that young *ramooshee*, and should make a good policeman. Had he been armed it would have been the easiest thing in the world to have clubbed me into insensibility there and then. As it was, my revolver here came in handy and I dealt him several hard blows with it on the head, whereat he seized me by the throat and commenced throttling me in deadly earnest.

"Help! help!" I cried ere yet his grip choked me.
"Help! he is murdering me!"

It might have fared badly with me then in spite of the heavy blows I continued raining on his face and head had

not that brave young woman come to my assistance. Realizing my own peril she at once threw herself at the *ramooshee* and dragged him off me by main force, while I on my part seconded her efforts with a good parting blow from the butt of the weapon I held.

Whether it was the result of the blows I had given him, or that seeing himself outmatched he deemed it prudent to faint insensibility I cannot say, but this much I know—the man rolled on his side groaning audibly, leaving me free to regain my feet.

"Quick," said I with a gasp to the mother for I had scarcely yet recovered my own breath; "get the child and come with me."

She ran to the child, picked it up, and with sobs—for womanlike she had begun to cry the moment the more pressing danger had passed—hurried along beside me.

I led her into the town to the house of a friend with whose family she lodged for the remainder of that night. In the morning I reported the occurrence to my superior officer, who ordered me to put this my report in writing.

Subnis Daknee,
Sub-Inspector.

Such was the account of this strange affair as I read it in the report sent in to me by Kavanagh. There was a footnote to it signed by that officer which informed me that he had deemed it prudent for the time being to get the young woman and her child out of the town to safer quarters and so had sent them on to Somma, where he doubted not Miss Westerley would keep an eye on them.

He asked that these proceedings might be confirmed and orders passed regarding future proceedings against the inmates of Heera Bagh that I considered necessary. I put the report on one side when I had finished reading it and took time to consider what course of action was open to me.

CHAPTER XVIII

"I DO not see what action we can take in a matter of this sort," I remarked to John Kavanagh whom I had written to in the course of the day to call round and see me regarding the Heera Bagh incident. "Beyond trying to get the woman and child back into his custody, you see, Sardar Mattay and his associates do not appear to have transgressed any section of the penal code I can think of. What section do you propose applying to their case ? "

"Wrongful restraint or wrongful confinement I think would cover the offence, sir," the young Superintendent replied.

"It would, had the offence been completed," I suggested ; "but you see, though there may have been an attempt at wrongful restraint, the restraint was never really exercised, because the young woman escaped with her child before she could be stopped."

"Still, the woman was in the house when they sought to restrain her, sir."

"True enough, but she was there of her own free will. Restraint did not commence until she objected to remaining there, you see ; and it would be extremely difficult to say precisely when that period commenced. You understand me, Kavanagh ? Your man, I should say, interposed just in time to prevent restraint being exercised. In that he saved these people from the consequences of their own acts."

"Yes, I can see your point, sir," said Kavanagh.

"Well, then, I do not see how you can charge them with wrongful restraint or wrongful confinement. You might ask for a search warrant on the ground that they were detaining the woman's goods."

"That would do quite as well as anything, sir. We want to have a view of the interior of those premises, and this

would serve our purpose. Make it a search warrant," said Kavanagh.

While the warrant was being prepared by a clerk I turned again to Kavanagh.

" You say in your report that the woman and her child have been entrusted to Miss Westerley's keeping at Somma. Has Miss Westerley accepted the trust? Does it not seem like imposing on her good nature to ask her to accept the responsibility of looking after Mrs. Bodh and her little son ? "

" Miss Westerley exacted a promise from me that I would keep an eye on Mrs. Bodh and would let her know at once if her friend needed assistance," Kavanagh replied with just the faintest show of embarrassment? I thought. " I telegraphed to Miss Westerley and received a reply asking me to send them on to Somma by the first available train."

" O, that's all right then. I merely mentioned the fact as I also have some obligations in the same direction."

" With regard to Mrs. Bodh, sir ? " Kavanagh inquired with a slight raising of the eye-brows.

" Well, indirectly, yes ; since I suppose she is included in the trust. The fact is, Bodh was a Service man and a friend of mine. At least—ahem—you know before he developed his present curious craze," I added quickly by way of explaining my interest in the case. " He asked me to see to the education of the lad when he grows up ; so I suppose that implies an obligation at least not to lose sight of him before he comes to the school-going age, eh ? "

" Yes, of course," said Kavanagh. " Miss Westerley told me that Mrs. Bodh's husband was in the Indian Civil Service, but had abandoned his career, out of a whim that his mother had devoted him to a religious life. Queer thing to do, I should say."

" Very," I answered. " The religious mania is the most widespread in the world, and is responsible for half the charity and more than half the misery we see about us. However, it is not our business to criticise these things. If Bodh chose to make an ass of himself that's his own business. My concern is only with his son. Well—I suppose since Miss Westerley has undertaken to keep a maternal eye on the mother and kid we had better leave it at that. You will understand, of course, Kavanagh, that I have an interest in being consulted regarding Mrs. Bodh and her child in future, quite apart from my duties as District Magistrate."

" I understand, sir."

"And now about this search of the premises. You will confine yourself strictly to what applies to this case and not interfere with the man's private concerns, I hope."

"Quite. We want only to satisfy ourselves on certain points regarding which rumours have been reaching us but about which we can get no certain information."

"That's right. You'll let me know, I trust, how the search has succeeded?"

"Yes, sir. I hope to see you again either this evening or tomorrow morning."

"Very well; here is your warrant," I concluded as I signed, blotted, and handed over the paper which a native clerk had a moment or two before laid on the table in front of me.

Kavanagh took the paper, read it a moment, and then finding it in order, bade me "good morning" and left.

It was not till 4 o'clock that afternoon that I saw him again.

"Well? had a successful time?" I asked cheerily as he entered and took a seat.

"Rotten!" exclaimed Kavanagh with the brevity of a man whose best hopes have been disappointed. "We found nothing; the birds had flown."

"Ha!" I exclaimed; "they evidently foresaw a visit from you."

"They did, and what is more, took the precaution of leaving nothing of a suspicious nature behind them. We found the place absolutely deserted, except for the watchman in charge of the premises—and he could not or would not tell us anything beyond saying that the Sardar and his family had left that morning on a pilgrimage. He couldn't say where they had gone to, or how many men were of the party. All he would admit was that they had gone."

"Quick work, eh?" I laughed.

"Very," said Kavanagh with a smile which hardly sufficed to cloak the disappointment he wished to conceal. "But as though that were not enough I must get this confounded telegram the moment I come back."

He handed me the message which he had held in his hand while we talked. It was timed 1-30 p.m. and had been despatched from Somma by Kate Westerley. It read:—

Mrs. Bodh's little son missing since noon. Come at once.

The news was serious enough, but what staggered me more than the gravity of the tidings the message conveyed was that Kate Westerley should have appealed first of all to John Kavanagh, and not to me.

I was somewhat pale and a trifle agitated, I fear, as I handed back the telegram, remarking as I did so : " What do you propose doing ? "

" I shall start for Somma by the next train and see if we can get trace of that youngster again," said Kavanagh, his face lighting up with anticipation at the thought of meeting Kate.

" You're hardly likely to discover him there," I said, wishing to dissuade him for no other reason than the natural jealousy a man feels when he thinks a rival is being more favoured than himself.

" I can at least get the details of his disappearance first hand from those best able to tell me something," remarked the young policeman, rather drily I thought. " Miss Westerley is sure to have made inquiries, and what she says may help to put us on the right track."

" Quite true ; but I should say a native Inspector would be a far more useful fellow to put on the job. What Miss Westerley knows will probably not be a tithe of what there is to tell in a case of this sort."

" I am taking Sub-Inspector Daknee with me," Kavanagh made answer. " He can get the native version while Miss Westerley tells me what she knows."

" I may have to see Miss Westerley myself before long since Bodh constituted me a sort of guardian of his son and heir," I said as pleasantly as I could. " So you had better hurry on with your investigations, Kavanagh, and give Miss Westerley a hint that more in the same strain may presently follow from me."

" I will," said Kavanagh with what grace he could, for no lover likes to see his *inamorata* exposed to the wiles of another man, and that Kavanagh was in love, or verging on it, was as patent as the hair on his face.

When he had gone I began to reflect on the situation as it had developed within the last forty-eight hours. Could there be more behind this affair of the goddess than in my cultured ignorance I had felt disposed to admit hitherto ? Had I been purposely blind to the warnings I had received, or was there a goodly leaven of charlatanism and trickery underlying the cult of Kali as I had encountered it during the years of my residence in India ? Faith is in general simplicity, qualified by knowledge, and the greater

the depth of faith the more marketable the simplicity of which it is the exponent. That men should trade on the beliefs of their fellows was surely a common enough feature of everyday life not to cause any surprise at my time of life; but might there not, after all, be a good deal of whole-hearted belief combined with it as well? Might not these men be perfectly convinced that what they were doing was in accordance with the wishes of the deity they venerated?

My own position, too, was not a little mysterious when you come to consider it with the introspection a man sometimes devotes to his own self-examination. Why, after all these years, did Kashinath Ghorpade still persist in claiming me as a sort of special devotee of the goddess when he knew perfectly well that my father was determined to punish him if he persisted in the foolish notion that my mother had ever made vows at the temple? His curious mistake as to my real identity was explicable enough when one remembered his age and failing faculties; but his perceptions seemed unusually acute regarding all that pertained to the shrine, while the faithfulness with which his memory recalled incidents long since passed seemed to argue the brooding melancholy of the ascetic to whom spiritual manifestations are as landmarks in the course of a life of austere penitence.

But Kashinath Ghorpade's delusions, or whatever else they might be, to the contrary, notwithstanding my own experiences, were no whit less peculiar. How, for instance, was I to account for my dream on the night of the Beldia ball and Hetty's strange sensations after our visit to the temple of Mahadeo? Hetty's fancies might have been due to a strong imagination, wrought up to a pitch of excitement from hearing what my mother had said; but my own dream could hardly have been due to quite the same causes and must be set down to inherited instincts which came into play the moment vitality had sunk below normal.

These and similar thoughts led me by easy stages to think of Kate Westerley, which by equally easy transition gave rise to a longing to see her again. What more favourable opportunity could I desire than the present, thought I, for was not my promise to Bodh to look after his son's future a sufficiently valid excuse for inquiring into the present whereabouts of the youngster? A man sometimes does queerly foolish things when deprived of the balancing influence of his wife's companionship, and my resolve to see Kate again under the flimsy guise of inquiring about Bodh's infant son can hardly be set down as among the sanest actions of my life.

By lamplight I had quite convinced myself of the necessity of a visit to Somma. Kavanagh, I concluded, would be sure to catch the Beldia Express which would bring him to his

destination by 10-30 or 11 p.m. when it would be too late for him see Miss Westerley. This might make him defer his visit to her till next morning, which would fit in quite nicely with my own projected visit.

Accordingly next morning found me at Somma where the tiny waiting-room in the small station building afforded me the accommodation I desired during my brief stay in the place. Early as it was, Kavanagh, I surmised, would have paid his visit, for there was in his case the double spur to action that youthful ardour and professional keenness supply; while, were further incentive necessary, it was there in the shape of the lover's natural anxiety to behold the object of his dreams and longings. The event proved that I had accurately summed up the situation.

The morning was still fresh without the inconvenience of a too powerful sun when I reached the residence of the Westerleys. Colonel Westerley was out inspecting his regiment and Mrs. Westerley had not yet come down, but Kate Westerley was seated with some work in her lap on a strip of lawn in the shadow of the building. She looked up as she heard my footsteps on the path and rose to greet me with one of her usual bright smiles. Then it was I learnt from her the facts just stated as she excused her father's absence on duty and Mrs. Westerley's engagement in her household affairs. That Kavanagh had already been there I could see from the vacant wicker chair opposite, into which she waved me with a graceful gesture of her small hand which still held a threaded needle between finger and thumb and a silver thimble fitted on the end of the central digit. Was it affectation or a desire to impress her young visitor that made Kate Westerley pick up a piece of needlework in place of a novel thus early, I mentally conjectured, as I regarded her with the admiration most men feel for the woman who has pricked their fancy?

"Mr. Kavanagh was here a while ago in connection with the disappearance of Mrs. Bodh's son," said Miss Westerley. "Isn't it dreadful that these things should happen in a country like this? I suppose you have heard all about it, Mr. Claire?"

"Kavanagh showed me your telegram to him," I replied. "Beyond that I know nothing, though it is for the purpose of getting further information I now call on you, Miss Westerley. Like you, I, too, have promised Bodh to keep an eye on his infant son; hence my visit, as you may surmise."

"Have you been told that Mrs. Bodh has also disappeared?" asked Kate with the dramatic suddenness with which some people impart information.

"No, indeed!" I exclaimed, "when did that happen?"

"Last night," said Kate Westerley with a slight break in her voice. "Poor thing, I feel so dreadfully upset about the whole thing. She was staying with a few friends not far from us when word was brought me yesterday that her little son was missing. I went over immediately to ascertain the facts and try to console her; but what was the good?"

"Why?" I asked eagerly.

"She was in a dead faint," said Kate. "We had an awful time trying to bring her round and even then she only came half to. Dr. Batten thinks the shock may unhinge her mind. Any way, there you see what has happened since: she goes and disappears last night and nobody knows anything about it till this morning. My butler informed us of it when we came down."

"Poor thing!" was all I could ejaculate by way of reply, thus unconsciously repeating my companion's words, for I could see that there were tears in Kate Westerley's eyes.

We said nothing for a while, but it was easy to see that she was making a great effort to control her feelings. I let her smooth out her work on her knee, then inspect it from an angle, and at last rearrange it in another form. What a strange thing is human emotion, and yet how we strive to conceal it from other eyes lest we be thought weak!

"Have you heard nothing of Mrs. Bodh since?" I ventured to inquire as soon as the moment seemed propitious for a resumption of the conversation.

"Nothing at all since—since—that is to say since she disappeared," Miss Westerley replied. "Father told me he would send out some of his men to search the neighbourhood, but I'm afraid it will be of little avail."

"Why so?" I enquired.

"You see," said Kate, "she was so dreadfully cut up at the loss of her son that I shall not be surprised to hear she has committed suicide."

"That is a contingency I was beginning to fear myself the moment you told me of her disappearance."

"I hope it isn't true; but still I cannot help fearing the worst. Mr. Kavanagh who was here but a while ago was hardly more hopeful than you are, Mr. Claire."

"That is because we know how easily the female temperament in this country inclines to self-destruction in cases of extreme dejection."

"Anyway I trust it will not be so in the present instance and I do so hope the police will succeed in finding the little boy and punish those who have tried to kidnap him."

"Tried" to kidnap him, I mentally commented. Why, the rascals could not have hoped to succeed better than they did. Yet here was pretty Kate Westerley speaking of the affair as if it had turned out, or was about to turn out, a dead failure. Well, it not unfrequently happens that a woman in talking illogically sometimes anticipates the true course of events more accurately than a man; and I'm sure I should not grudge Kate Westerley the satisfaction of saying "I knew it would be so;" or "I told you so."

However to the young lady before me I merely remarked: "Has Mr. Kavanagh told you what happened at Heera Bagh the other night?"

"Yes; wasn't it atrocious, dedicating the child to the god, without his mother's permission? She was brave, too, to have fought all those dreadful men and carried off her boy in the way she did." "She is a plucky girl," I admitted. "But Miss Westerley, do you think it was quite wise on your part to place yourself in their power in the way you did a while back?"

"Where ignorance is bliss—you know, Mr. Claire. Besides I did it for a purpose. What would poor Mrs. Bodh have done now without any friends to assist her?"

"I do not see where the assistance you speak of has come in as yet," I remarked laughing.

"There now, do not be cynical," said Kate. "You will see things come right yet, I'm sure; besides, cynicism is so very discouraging. Do be optimistic."

"Very well," I replied. "Let us hope Col. Westerley's sowars will succeed in discovering both Mrs. Bodh and the boy before evening. It might have been a great deal worse, you know, if Miss Westerley had been the kidnapped instead of the other one. Wherefore let us be thankful for small mercies."

"Yes, indeed, let us be thankful," laughed Kate. "Wouldn't it cause a sensation if I was kidnapped?"

"We should never tolerate that. The cavalry would be wanting to engage in pitched battles with all whom they suspected of having a hand in the kidnapping, and that would lead to no end of a to-do. No, no; better a thousand times Mrs. Bodh than Miss Westerley," I waved a deprecating hand as I said this and rose to go.

"Give Mrs. Claire my love when you write, will you? How are she and the boy getting on?" she had risen to her

feet at the same time as myself and I suppose considered it only the usual form of politeness to inquire regarding the health of Hetty and the child. Still both of us became instantly conscious that we were treading on dangerous ground, for a feeling of embarrassment, the first she had displayed hitherto, was dimly visible in her face and bearing.

"The last letter I had from my wife was from Bournemouth where she was spending a few months with Major Savage's mother and sister," I said with an assumption of calmness I was very far from feeling. "My wife finds the climate so very congenial that I suppose she will choose Bournemouth as a permanent residence."

It was a foolish thing to say, but men say and do many silly things in the course of their lives, when labouring under the sense of imaginary wrongs.

"I shouldn't take so gloomy a view of it if I were you," laughed Kate, far from displaying any resentment at my clumsy attempt to apply the scalpel to her own recent wound. "Syd is no longer young and impetuous and there is her baby to keep Mrs. Claire from drifting into folly. Why do you not take a holiday yourself, Mr. Claire? I am sure you need one just as most of us do. Mrs. Claire would welcome the idea and you could easily get a few months off."

"I'm afraid not," I said as graciously as I could. "If you were going back, now, perhaps I might try to get a few months out of India," I added meaningfully.

"I like the country too well to run away so soon," Kate made answer. "I am growing to take an interest in its inhabitants."

We had been walking towards the garden gate during the latter part of our conversation and so I took my leave when we arrived at the end of our journey.

That evening while strolling idly through the only public garden Somma boasts I had ocular confirmation of the truth of Kate Westerley's boast that she was taking an increasing interest in the inhabitants of the country. Ahead of me walked a young man and woman if not arm-in-arm at least so close together that one might be forgiven for supposing they were. The conversation must have been of an absorbing and interesting nature because each occasionally turned to look into the other's face in the way that lovers do, and there was a joyous tinkle in their laughter that was very pleasant to hear. The girl, I could swear, was Kate Westerley; and as to the man, if he was not John Kavanagh I do not know anyone who so closely resembled the young policeman.

CHAPTER XIX

A NOTHER letter from Hetty ! Well this is indeed a pleasing symptom of a return to her better nature after the very abrupt refusal she gave me regarding my claims to her companionship considered in the scale against little Cyril's supposed danger.

Dewhurst Bournemouth,

10th May.

My dearest Arthur,

I have been graduating in folly, as you are sure to put it when you read this letter : I have consulted a fortune-teller.

But before you make up your mind on the subject let me first explain to you the sort of person "Madame Indiana" is. She is not one of the ordinary kind of people you meet with in the business who are always bent on making money out of those who consult them. She is an Indian princess, with a very long line of ancestors, and her object in visiting England, she told me, was to discover the new *Mahavira*, who, it was revealed to her, is to be incarnated again this century.

Now who or what is this *Mahavira*, Arthur ? Perhaps you with your great learning and study of Hindu writings will be able to tell me. "Indiana" says that *Mahavira* is the deity who will appear on earth once more as a very learned pundit. If that be true I do not envy her search, since she is sure to have a most awful time, I should say, trying to decide between the rival claims of the many erudite pundits in England. Any way, there you are ; if you do not know more about *Mahavira* than I do, do not say afterwards I did not tell you what little you do know.

Well, dear, as I have said, "Indiana" has a mission in this country which is to discover and take back with her to India the great *Mahavira*. The horoscope of the great and mighty one has already been revealed to her, but to make assurance doubly sure there are to be certain signs by which divination

is to be established. Thus round *Mahavira's* right wrist will be seen the rascette, or triple line magic bracelet of health, wealth, and happiness. Fancy, dear, I have two of the rings round my own wrist—only two, isn't it a shame? or who knows if "Indiana" might not have found that I was the great *Mahavira*?—But, there, I'm forgetting. *Mahavira* is to be a mere man, so you are spared the mortification of seeing me whipped off to become the head of a great religious sect. What a shame men should be allowed to monopolise all the best jobs in the world!

However, let me proceed with what I was saying. *Mahavira's* right thumb and index finger are to be longer and more pointed than his left, showing that energy and will are kept in subjection to reason and sentiment. Now, dear, do not laugh and think me foolish, but my right thumb and index finger are really longer than my left. I have measured them, the one against the other, and know this for a fact. I showed my hands to "Indiana" and she admits that it is so, but with this difference: my hands, she says, are of the artistic type, being conical, whereas to fulfil the requirements of the sage's prediction *Mahavira's* hand must be psychic or pointed. Major Savage thinks that is a distinction with little or no difference, as my thumbs and index fingers are certainly more psychic than artistic. I am inclined to agree with him.

There are many other signs by which "Indiana" says she will know the sage the moment she sees him, but she would not tell me what they are. Now, don't call me a mug, Arthur, and "Indiana" a fraud, because you know I do not fit in with your favourite description of your friends, and as to "Indiana"—you have only to meet her to see at once that she is not a fraud or given to anything shady. She is tall and graceful, with large lustrous dark eyes and, oh, such long lashes, a lovely set of teeth, and, a beautiful olive complexion. I have taken quite a fancy to her, and she, I suppose, to me, as she has asked me to go and spend a few days with her at her villa and to bring baby with me.

I shall probably go there one day next week. Miss Savage advises me not to take baby as she can very well look after him for one day; but I cannot consent to that. Nurse can go with me, so that it will be little or no extra trouble.

Tata, dearest, more anon. With fondest love from baby and me.

Ever your affectionate,
Hetty.

Any married man who receives such a letter from his wife can picture to himself what my feelings were on the subject.

The promised visit to Madame with the dark lustrous eyes fringed with their lashes must already be a thing of the past, I reflected as I laid the letter aside for re-perusal if necessary at some future date; at present I had my own duties to attend to which needed my whole attention.

It was with a feeling amounting almost to relief, therefore, that I welcomed John Kavanagh not very long afterwards. More than a fortnight had gone by since I had seen him and Kate Westerley in the Public garden at Somma, and though I had waited anxiously for enlightenment regarding the mysterious disappearance of Mrs. Bodh and her son I had hitherto waited in vain.

"The young fool is wasting his time in idle dalliance with that girl," I had reflected more than once. "However, that is his own look-out. It will be no fault of mine if he has to be censured for remissness," such had been my thoughts.

"Any news of the missing ones?" were my first words as he now entered the room in which I transact all my official correspondence.

"None whatever," he replied. "We have searched the country round about Somma; have had most of the wells dragged, and have warned all police posts to keep a bright look out for any one answering to the descriptions of the woman and child. So far I have received no reports, good, bad or indifferent. I also paid a visit to the temple of Mahadeo down south and to Sardar Mattay's country house in that neighbourhood. The old fox, Kashinath Ghorpade, has not been seen near the temple for quite an age, while the watchman at the house tells me the family have not been near the place since they came to their other residence here at Beldia.

"They are not at Heera Bagh, are they?"

"I have a man on watch there; so far they do not appear to have returned, as no suspicious movements inside have been reported."

"Not a very promising outlook?" I rejoined. "What do you propose doing now?"

"Nothing for the present," Kavanagh made answer. "We can only wait on events. Something is sure to turn up ere long."

And so it came about once more, as happens so often in life, that we ended by throwing on time the responsibility for providing a solution of the mystery.

The weeks slipped away after this with nothing more exciting occurring to vary the monotony of life at Beldia than the ordinary everyday routine which spells existence in India.

With average luck most men, whose early official years are spent in outlying districts, can look forward to a transfer to headquarters as they ripen in experience and gather the weight of girth and grey hairs, as in most walks in life. However, luck means generally the favour of one's official superiors, and as I had every reason to hope that there was nothing in the docket of my services that might be construed into isolation in outlandish districts I presumed that it would not be long now before I was called upon to take a step higher in the official grade which eventually leads to a seat on the Executive Council. A good-looking wife is a wonderful help to a man at such times and I often regretted the foolish whim which kept Hetty at Home when she might have done so much at hill stations and other resorts of the official hierarchy of the province, to remind them that I was in danger of languishing if the moisture of patronage were long withheld from me.

When such a train of thought occurred to me it generally served to recall Rachael Towner and her husband to my mind. Towner had already broken through the deadening influence of district life and was basking in the sunshine of official favour. He was now acting Under Secretary to Government, which meant that he was being initiated into the mysteries of red-tape with a view to its future successful employment on his own account when he should have climbed to heights elysian and be seated at the board of the gods. Such a result, could only have been achieved by Rachael Towner's curries ; and, by joye ! those were curpies too ! The very recollection of them is enough to whet my appetite and make me long for the approach of the breakfast hour, alas ! how often only to be disappointed in the futile attempts of the household domestic to attain the unattainable. Cookery is an art which though many aspire to few attain with any degree of perfection. To the girl born in India the virtues of diverse condiments and their proper employment in the dressing of dishes is very often a transmitted heritage from mother to daughter where time is found to impart such knowledge from one to the other. Rachael Towner was one of the lucky ones who had not been above turning her hand to the more homely, and yet how vitally necessary ! art of cookery ; and now she had her reward, not only in the possession of a contented husband, but in the knowledge that she had been able to push on that husband's interests by reason of the excellent little dinners she gave to his friends.

Towner's present position on the ladder of success was a sufficient testimony, I thought, to his wife's ability. Mrs. Towner had taken her sister Maud under her wing in the hope that she might help to get dreamy novel-reading Maud

a good start in life. The arrangement had been six months in operation, as far as I could make out from the gossip of mutual friends, but there seemed little chance of the event terminating as the family hoped it might, unless indeed, Maud achieved her ideal of meeting a young lover who delighted in top boots and jingling spurs. She played tennis daily at the Club with sufficient diligence, I was assured, to give Cupid every assistance in his search for suitable mates ; but the young god was either stringing his bow afresh, or else putting a new point to his arrows, as he seemed oblivious of the presence of the young people at the Club who indulged in mild flirtations mostly, as it seemed, for the sake of the amusement they afforded.

One can generally learn a good deal of the kind of life one's friends are leading from the stippling of those in the same service who have been afforded opportunities of meeting them or of mixing in the same circles. These little sketches help to fill the canvas of life and bring into relief, with amusing variety, the foibles and frailties of our dearest friends whom we love and cherish none the less for the knowledge we possess of their several traits. Rachael Towner's curries and Maud Cowper's angling for an alliance afforded me a pleasing glimpse of the great world beyond Beldia—the world of which I had hitherto had but passing glimpses at rare intervals when I had travelled up to headquarters. I had written to Towner regarding certain matters connected with my work which are all the better for being settled unofficially instead of through the usual rigmarole of official correspondence, and his reply had been a cordial invitation to come and spend a week with them and have the thing settled by a personal interview with the member of Council concerned.

"Rachael says she will accept no refusal this time," he wrote. "You have never been to Burranugger for any length of time before, I think you told me once, so why not take advantage of the present opportunity and run down for a few days ? You can easily get a week off, which I shall arrange for you ; besides, the change will be sure to do you good. Moreover, you know as well as I, that the things you mention are much better settled at personal interviews than by any amount of correspondence. It will help to bring you into the limelight a little more by making you more intimately acquainted with Jepson and Carlyle and also His Excellency for that matter.

"My advice, therefore, is run in for a week. We can make you comfortable, as we have quite a large bungalow at our disposal, and there is besides Rachael's sister Maud and our little Cissy. We shan't bore you more than we can help, I

promise you. So just send a wire along saying when we may expect you and all shall be in readiness."

The idea pleased me exceedingly. I had long been anxious to cultivate the Hon. Mr. Carlyle, and the members of Council, a little more nearly than I had hitherto done, as so much depended on their good opinion of me. As I have already remarked, it was becoming time I got out of district work into the more salubrious atmosphere of town life where the amenities of existence are more suited to a man of middle age like myself. When opportunity accords so seasonably with one's inclinations, as the present one did with mine, it does not take very long to get going on the line that has been marked out. I therefore telegraphed to Towner that he might expect me at Burranugger on the following evening in time for dinner, and gave my servant instructions to pack a couple of trunks with such articles of wearing apparel as there would be use for during my week's stay. In accordance with the above determination I found Towner awaiting me at the railway station next evening in a frame of mind that looked as if he was afraid I would lose myself in the rush and hurry of so populous a town as Burranugger. Life as an Under Secretary to Government had undoubtedly polished him up a good deal I could see, he spoke with more assurance than I had ever known him do before; he had acquired the mode of addressing one that men employ who are perpetually engaged in persuading others to courses of action not altogether in consonance with their wishes; and seemed quite grown out of the period when Rachael used good naturedly to readjust his necktie, pull his waistcoat straight, and otherwise correct those slight inaccuracies of toilette that seemed to offend against her sense of the aesthetic and appropriate in his attire.

"Do not worry about your things, Claire; the peon will fetch them on to the bungalow in a jiffy," he said as soon as I had disengaged myself and my belongings from the carriage in which we had travelled down from Beldia. "This is your man, I suppose," he continued, indicating my servant who had just then hurried up. "Here boy, bring master's things to the bungalow; the peon will show you the house."

With that we made our way to the station exit where at the step stood a new panhard with a smart chauffeur in livery in attendance. That the police should have permitted his car to be drawn up at the entrance to the exclusion of the other traffic, at a time when a great congestion might be looked for, was to my matured experience of Indian ways and manners another indication that Towner had risen in the estimation of the world with his rise out of the ruck of district work. Any lingering doubts on the point were

speedily dissipated when I noted how the local representative of law and order placed himself in a position whence he could have the satisfaction of saluting his superior and receiving his acknowledgment in return; and to do Towner justice, he had a good conceit of himself and made no secret of the fact.

Rachel Towner, I discovered, had not changed in any perceptible degree from the Rachel Towner of our acquaintance. Her gowns were a trifle more expensive, due no doubt to the fact that they were now being ordered at more expensive establishments, and she wore a necklace of amethysts that suited well the rich colour of the ample bosom on which they reposèd. Otherwise she was the same light-hearted, witty creature of the old days, the same good-natured motherly woman, the identical Rachel of whom Towner was so inordinately proud, and who looked upon him as the embodiment of every masculine virtue. If ever man was blessed in his wife I felt that night that Towner was.

We sat down to dinner at a table on which the appointments were in admirable taste, the flowers neither too gaudy nor obtrusive, and the china, glass, and silver ware of that crystalline brightness that betokens the careful supervision of the lady of the house. Mrs. Towner had me at her right hand and her sister at her left; while between Maud and Towner—who was at the lower end of the table—sat little Cissy, allowed as a special privilege to be present in honour of my visit.

Maud Cowper, or Miss Cowper as I should more appropriately now call her, within the two or three years that had elapsed since I had last seen her with the Towners had outgrown many of her hoydenish ways. The callow smartness of the flapper had disappeared, for one thing, and in its place was a more staid manner and a better informed view on men and things in general. This in itself would have been a relief to a man, who, with the experience of life to look back upon, could hardly be expected to sit still under the contumacious contradictions of a Miss fresh from school, whose only maxims bore the stamp of the text-book and whose quips were as pointless as the borrowed puns of a magazine usually are. Miss Cowper, I soon discovered, had cast off these habiliments of the school-going age and had donned in their stead the quiet reserve of a well-bred and well-informed young woman. There was a latent desire apparent in her manner, of course, to make herself agreeable to her friends and acquaintances, but it had nothing of the sordid self-seeking in it that gossip had sought to invest it with, and was just the sort of friendliness we like to see associated

with the women with whom we are brought into frequent contact. She was agreeable for the sake of being agreeable, had none of the stilted mannerisms of one who feels that she is not quite at home in the atmosphere she is in, and altogether had the seeming of developing into a woman of no ordinary attractiveness and power.

All this I was able to note in the course of the dinner that followed. Maud was of a type of beauty different from Rachel. She had taken after her father, and consequently had more of the pink and white complexion we see in northern races than the rich brunette of the south. Her figure too, though tall and shapely, had none of the plumpness of her sister's. Rachel Towner was a woman who attracted your eye the moment she came within range of its vision ; Maud Cowper grew on you by slow and imperceptible degrees in a way that proved she had not failed to inherit some, at least, of her mother's charms of face and manner.

"How is dear old Beldia ?" Mrs. Towner enquired, while the meal was in progress. "Are tennis tournaments still the chief bone of contention among middle aged ladies, and moonlight picnics the acme of happiness for the youth and beauty of its railway population ?"

"We have not improved in our methods the least little bit I fear, Mrs. Towner, only changed in our disposition." I replied. "Tennis is still our chief distraction, and moonlight picnics our main portal into matrimony."

"It would hardly be fair to expect Beldians to give up either, then, would it ?" Miss Cowper remarked laughing.

"Hardly as yet," I replied, "though I see a time ahead when airplanes may possibly supplant the picnic idea."

"That will be grand, will it not ?" Miss Cowper rejoined.

"It will," I admitted. "Just think of the part—the all important part—an airplane may play in a case where parents are unreasonable."

"Or the girl rebellious, eh ?" put in Towner, much to our surprise and amusement.

"Or the girl rebellious," I allowed, "or where there is a silly, teasing, whipper-snapper of a brother in the case," Rachel Towner added with a sly glance at her husband; whereat we all laughed heartily.

"Just so," said I. "Little brothers are the most troublesome creatures in the world at such times, and any means of escaping their unwelcome attentions would be accepted as a heaven-sent boon. An airplane in such circumstances would be just the thing."

"Yes ; there is a decided future before the flying-machine as a matrimonial agent," Towner allowed. "The I.C.S. man of the future will not require more than a fortnight's leave when he wants to get married. All he need do, then, is to hire a good type of flier ; set off for England, get spliced and fly back to India with his bride."

"O, indeed," exclaimed Maud ; "I should never consent to such an arrangement."

"Why not ?" asked Towner in feigned surprise.

"I should need at least a week's honeymooning in order to get used to my husband."

"O !" exclaimed Rachel Towner.

"If you haven't got used to your husband long before you arrange to marry him, it will be too late to begin the trial on the honeymoon trip," said Towner with the sententious wisdom of a Solomon.

"Yes, indeed," acquiesced his wife. "Never marry a man you do not know and love thoroughly, Maud. You can never be happy otherwise."

She turned to cast a look of affectionate pride on Towner whose glance lighted up wonderfully as his eyes encountered those of his wife. They were still lovers, these two ; the thing was patent to any one observing them ; and Maud, I saw, duly appreciated the fact at the moment, for her glance at me was full of enlightenment.

Cissy now claimed the attention of her mother. She had ceased eating and was sitting back making a queer hissing sound with her mouth.

"What's the matter, Cissy darling ?" asked Maud turning to her niece.

"Ot——, Ot !" said Cissy, repeating the noise in a louder key.

"Water !"

Maud helped her to her own glass of lemonade, while Mrs. Towner quickly put a serving of pudding on a plate and handed it to the butler to place in front of the tot.

Towner and I laughed heartily at this little scene.

"Rachel puts too many green chillies into her salads," said the former, half in apology for the interlude.

"Indeed I removed all the chillies from the salad before giving her any," said Mrs. Towner in apologetic accents.

"A seed or two probably escaped your vigilant attention, Mrs. Towner," said I from quite evident appreciation of the fact.

"They didn't escape Cissy's vigilant attention at any rate," laughed Towner as he glanced in the direction of his little daughter who was now contentedly smothering the burning sensation on her tongue with junks of rolly pudding.

"Not 'ot now," Cissy here broke in, a teaspoon of custard hovering on the verge of the crater that had just ceased hissing. "Pudding not 'ot."

"Is the pudding nice, Cissy?" her father inquired with affectionate pride in the growing intelligence of his only child.

"Yes, nice. Me like custard," the child admitted; and the verdict of her elders, I feel sure, amply bore out her candid opinion, for the pudding was but a fitting finale to as fine a dinner as any I had eaten elsewhere.

We spent the evening in the drawing-room where Mrs. Towner and her sister entertained us with music and singing until it was time to retire.

CHAPTER XX

THE week I spent with the Towners proved to be one of the pleasantest I had had for a long time, and it was with a feeling approaching regret that I left them at last to return to my own sphere of action and influence at Beldia. The honourable members of Council, Messrs. Jepson and Carlyle, to whom as in duty bound I paid calls, returned the compliment by inviting me to dinner ; and having as I thought, profitably despatched this part of my business, I was able to let myself go with more freedom in the easier and more agreeable task of having what is termed a good time generally.

Though by no means new to Burranugger there were still many sights to which I was a stranger, and these the Towners took care I should not miss ; which was eminently kind of them, considering that it is the duty of finding entertainment for our friends that is the most irksome in cases where one becomes an inmate in the house for any length of time. However, I drove out on occasions with Towner alone, more often in the company of his wife and sister-in-law, and once or twice with Miss Cowper as my sole companion. It is of the last that I retain the most lively recollections as any man in my position would who happened to be thrown into the company of a bright entertaining girl, such as Maud Cowper proved to be.

" Do you have to remain at home very often by yourself ? " I asked Miss Cowper on the last evening of my stay when Mr. and Mrs. Towner had been obliged to accept an invitation to dine at Government House, and Maud and myself were left to get on as best we could in each other's company.

We had finished dinner and withdrawn to the drawing-room where Maud had asked me to go on with my smoking while she played little snatches of song on the piano and sang in a quaintly melancholy strain. She had now left her music and taken a chair opposite me for the purpose, as she expressed it, of having a cosy chat all by ourselves.

"Pretty often," she replied, "though I mustn't complain.—You see, I am only in society here on what you may call sufferance: because my sister is the wife of an Under Secretary and I happen to be staying in her house. People do not forget the fact that my father was at one time a subordinate in the Police."

"That's very unkind of them," I remarked.

"It is unkind—," she picked me up sharply, "and I feel it very keenly at times, but I am getting used to slights of this sort. Rachel does her best to smooth things over for me, poor dear; and as for George—he is really the best of good fellows. Would you believe it, he actually cut Mrs. Popham dead because he overheard a remark of hers about the absurd airs which some country-born girls try to give themselves. That, as you may guess was meant for me."

"I'm glad Towner doesn't stand that sort of nonsense. I would have asked Mrs. Popham if she was quite sure of her own pedigree before she ventured to make remarks about other people. Are there many of the Popham variety about here?"

"Not very many, thank goodness, or I shouldn't remain where I am very long, I assure you. Mrs. Kirk is quite the other way about, and as for Mrs. Daly—she is a dear. They come over very often to tea or dinner, and they never omit to ask me when George and Rachel are invited."

"I know the Kirks very well. I'm glad you like Mrs. Kirk; she is a good soul. They belong to our Service. Who is Mrs. Daly though?"

"Mrs. Daly is the wife of the presidency Chaplain. Have you never met the Dalys?"

"I'm afraid Daly's lines have been cast in pleasant places which helps to account for the fact that I've never met him or his wife. My work, as you must have heard, has always hitherto been in outlandish districts."

"Poor soul!" Maud Cowper piquantly exclaimed, and then she laughed, while a self-conscious blush suffused her cheeks. "I didn't mean to be rude," she explained. "It is only my way of expressing sympathy with your isolation."

"Thank you, all the same," said I. "A man in my position doesn't get very much sympathy as a rule, so that whatever comes his way is generally very acceptable."

"I should have thought that as a District Magistrate sympathy would have been yours to command, Mr. Claire."

"Indeed!" I exclaimed; "how do you make that out?"

"Why, merely by reason of your position. Most women have a soft corner in their hearts for the man who is condemned to go through life alone. The ladies of Beldia are surely not different from the rest of their sex?"

"Possibly not, Miss Cowper. Still a man in my position has to appear very straight-laced, whatever his real predilections may be. I daresay there are some who sympathise with my isolation, and others who think it well deserved. Between the two what am I to do but grin and bear things? That's not a very philosophical sentiment I own; but indifference to the world's opinion seems the only antidote to calumny. It endues a man with a certain amount of self-respect even though it increases his isolation."

"Do you like your isolation, Mr. Claire?" Miss Cowper went on quietly.

"Not too much of it. No one likes to be alone at all times," I replied. "There are occasions when most of us feel that we need a period of quiet, of course; but for the rest, I am as fond of the society of my fellowmen—and women—as most average human beings."

"I should feel most dreadfully melancholy in your place, I know," Miss Cowper added decidedly. "Is it very long since Mrs. Claire went home?"

It was the first time she had alluded to Hetty since my arrival in Burranugger, for it seemed to be an understood thing in the household that any reference to my wife would be out of place and was to be avoided. That topic had therefore been rigorously taboo ever since my appearance. Miss Cowper's allusion to it was thus all the more unaccountable.

"A year more or less, I should say," I answered with all the indifference I could put into my tones. "I am getting reconciled to her absence pretty well by now, I assure you."

"I should never be able to stand the neglect of the person I loved," Maud Cowper went on with a shake of her pretty head. "It would render me quite desperate."

"That is what most passionate natures believe at first." I remarked with a smile. "Most of us learn to school our inclinations in time, however; those who do not—well—they suffer."

"Yes,—they suffer, and my sufferings, I know, would be terrible—terrible. Do you know, Mr. Claire, I have been so cynically indifferent, so loftily superior in my own estimation to the young men I have seen about me that I have frequently caught myself wondering what sort of thing love can be to make people behave so strangely at times. For

instance you frequently see the most awful frights among women married to the handsomest men, who are as jealous of their wives as if they were veritable Hebes. Why is that? you never see a beautiful woman who is jealous to distraction of an ugly husband, do you?"

"I daresay you do not, though I should not be too positive," I answered. "But then you see nature has implanted a good conceit of themselves in most women and a corresponding humility in men"—Maud laughed, but I went doggedly on—"so when a handsome man marries a plain girl who, in the course of years grows to be downright ugly, he does not realize the change in her but thinks it is his wife's brilliant wit or commanding personality that sheds the radiance of her coruscating presence on him."

"And what happens in the case of the beautiful wife who is tied to an ugly husband?" Miss Cowper asked with what I thought was great self-depreciation.

"O, the beautiful wife!" I remarked with the gesture of an elderly man, who lays down the law to a spring-onion school girl. The beautiful wife is a fool, to begin with, to give herself away to any ugly man;"—at this Maud laughed again—"secondly, she graduates in folly if she lets her ugly husband imagine that because he has won her he can win any other woman he has a mind to; thirdly, she is thrice fooled if she cannot draw round herself the admiration of a certain number of indifferently ugly men to counteract her husband's hankering after illicit amours."

"I must bear that in mind," said Maud. "Still I should never be able to stand the indifference of my husband," she continued with a far away look; "It would drive me crazy."

"Be careful whom you marry, then, Miss Cowper," I went on in my most didactic manner. "Remember that nature generally compensates for the lack of good looks by a plentiful supply of imagination. A woman may not be good-looking but she believes she is, if a man tells her so. No man, however ugly but knows himself to be the handsomest fellow alive. His knowledge is usually intuitive, while hers is acquired."

"I suppose in that case I may account myself good-looking, only if I am told so by a man?" she said with a demure look.

"You do not need to be reassured on the point, Miss Cowper," I pursued with the hardihood of forty odd summers. "Your mirror must have revealed the truth to you long ere this."

" Still it is something to have a man's assurance on the point, isn't it ? " said the little pussy with what I thought was an arch smile.

" Well, now that you have made me say it I do not mind admitting its truth," I went on, seeing that I had been led into a confession I had never before intended.

Miss Cowper said nothing, but presently rose and went to the piano. Like many women she needed only a man to tell her that she was a pretty girl before she would admit the conviction to herself. That the task should have devolved on me was one of those unlooked for incidents which are forever cropping up in human affairs whereby some of the most dramatic events of life are oftentimes drawn out.

" What shall I sing to you ? " she asked when she had seated herself at the piano.

" O, anything you have a mind to," said I. " Anything that pleases your fancy, is certain to please mine. I'm just in the mood to appreciate a sentimental ditty."

Presently she began to sing in a soft, melodious voice that was full of tremulous emotion. I rose and went to a window that looked out on the garden. It was a lovely moonlight night with a fresh breeze stirring the tree tops. From my position I had a good view of Maud Cowper as she poured out her soul in a flood of delicious harmony.

Here indeed, thought I, is a young woman destined by nature for the part of helpmate to a good man, yet deprived of her chance by a lack of appreciation of her qualities by those who take no trouble to study her. She finds herself in uncongenial surroundings; the people who make up what is called " society " in Burranugger affect to look down on her, forgetting that mentally she is probably as much superior to many of them as her sister Rachel shows herself to be domestically. But the end must inevitably be the same. Some master rogue in a gay uniform with an intuitive perception of woman's weak points will one day come along, and seeing this flower blooming alone in the wilderness will pluck and wear it for a while, and then cast it from him when its bloom is withered. Poor Maud ! your horoscope, I fear me, is cast in Saturn—the lord of melancholy.

With a cigarette to keep my thoughts company I puffed away in silence, letting the wreaths of smoke curl upward and outward until they mingled with the cool night air.

I was roused from the reverie into which my mind had drifted by hearing Miss Cowper's voice at my elbow.

"Isn't it a lovely night?" she said softly as she came up to my side.

"It is," I admitted; "just such a night as one associates with Romeo's escapade with Juliet when he said:

Lady, by yonder blessed moon I swear,
That tips with silver all these fruit-tree tops—

Before I could proceed, however, Maud Cowper broke into a soft laugh and immediately retorted:

"O, swear not by the moon, the inconstant moon
That monthly changes in her circled orb,
Lest that thy love prove likewise variable."

She stood close to my elbow and I could see the soft moonlight reflected from her clear eyes as they were turned laughingly on me, the milk white teeth framed in a setting of ruby-red lips, and the pretty head with its abundance of light brown hair.

"Poor Maud! I feel so sorry for you," I said caressing her cheek with two fingers. "Fate seems to be dealing harshly with you; but *nil desperandum*, you know. Things are never so bad that they may not mend one day. A fairy prince may even now be on his way to claim you."

She flushed a deep scarlet and the tears sprang to her eyes. She said nothing for a few moments but fidgeted uncomfortably for her handkerchief.

"Do not cry," I continued, holding her chin between two fingers. "You have lived in a world of girlish romance, and now find that the reality is somewhat different, that is all. Time and experience will correct the perspective. In the meantime do not grow despondent. ——The people you have been meeting during the past few months, heartless, shallow, insincere as they seem, are not the only people in the world. You are bound to come across others who will reach more up to your ideal of what goodness should be; then you can pick and choose for yourself. Just now, all you can do is to go on as you have been doing. Live your own life and do not mind what others say about you. Only beware how you trust too freely, for in that lies many a one's undoing. I can say no more at present."

"Thank you, Mr. Claire," she said softly. "I am most grateful for your sympathy," she had found her handkerchief at last and was using it, "I—I—feel wretchedly depressed at being left out in the cold in the way I so often am, though I know all the time I have no right to complain. I see now that it is wrong to give way to such feelings."

"That's the proper spirit in which to take these things, little Cinderella," I said stooping and kissing her on the lips, a caress she in no wise resented. "Now I had better go up to my own room. You can tell your sister when she returns that I went to bed as it was getting late."

"Do not go just yet, Mr. Claire," she rejoined. "It is not so very late; they are sure to be here in a short while. It is not yet 11-30."

"Late enough for all good people," said I laughing. "Besides, if I stay much longer I shall begin hugging you presently, now that I have already started kissing you."

She laughed a pleased little laugh, and crept nearer to my side.

"Kiss me just once more before you go," she whispered. "Only once."

I hesitated. "It isn't quite right I should do these things, you know," I admonished her, though the self-same instant saw me doing the very thing I had pretended to decline.

She returned the kiss with the ardour of a woman in love, putting both arms about my neck as she did so. For a few brief seconds she lay against my bosom, but then reason asserted itself and taking her arms gently down I bade her "good night" and slipped out of the room.

I had reached my room but a few minutes when I heard the motor car with Mr. and Mrs. Towner enter the drive.

CHAPTER XXI

MRS. TOWNER and her sister accompanied me to the railway station the following morning. Although Maud Cowper exchanged the usual friendly greetings with me on meeting at breakfast we both seemed sensible of a change in our relations to one another. You cannot barter kisses with a young and good-looking girl without wanting to repeat the process at the first opportune moment, and whatever her sentiments may have been I can vouch for the fact that mine were an incongruous jumble of foolish longings.

It was not very long, however, before I gathered from Maud Cowper's changed expression, her animated looks and gestures, and the glances she every now and then cast in my direction that the mischief I half dreaded, and yet hoped for, had been accomplished. I was glad for many reasons, therefore, that this day was to see the end of my visit to the Towners. It would have needed little for Maud Cowper to betray herself by an indiscreet word or gesture I thought, for at breakfast I once or twice detected a passing glance of surprise both in Towner's eyes and in those of his wife at Maud's exuberant flow of spirits.

Whether Towner ever discussed the point with his wife when I was out of the way I have no means of knowing. I daresay he did, as married people are shrewd enough at detecting the many shades that mark the transitions in love's barometer where the very young and inexperienced are concerned. For my part I was infinitely pleased at being able to get away. Conscience makes cowards of us all, and my conscience had suddenly grown to be a formidable accuser. As for Maud Cowper I sincerely hoped she would not be foolish enough to allow herself to be infatuated with a man twice her own age, a married man at that, and one whose wife was very much alive. Poor Maud!

When I got back to Beldia I found another letter awaiting me from Hetty. This was a pleasing attention on her part

I considered, even if a somewhat untimely reminder that my allegiance was due elsewhere and should not be jeopardised by exposure to temptations I might not have the strength of will to resist.

My dearest Arthur (she wrote),

I have just returned from my short stay at Madame Indiana's and so I sit down to write you a description of all that happened while the recollection of them is still fresh in my memory. The villa is quite a large place, and Madame Indiana very kindly placed a suite of rooms in one wing at the disposal of baby's nurse and myself, and appointed one of her own women to attend us. She was very good to us during the whole time of our stay with her, though I must admit I felt a bit nervous at the way she and her attendants treated baby.

On the first evening of our stay Grice gave me a most awful turn. I was talking to Madame Indiana in her own special boudoir which adjoins the drawing-room where she receives those who come to consult her when I heard a blood-curdling scream. We ran out to see what had happened and discovered Grice with Cyril in her arms looking as if she had seen a ghost.

"What is the matter, Grice?" I asked, for I was genuinely frightened myself.

"Nothing, Mam," said Grice, "only one of them ebony Injuns gave me a scare coming out on me sudden-like from a dark corner.

"Do be careful, Grice; you only frighten baby when you scream like that," I said half admonishingly, for I did not like Madame Indiana to fancy we distrusted any of her Indian attendants.

Madame laughed.

"Your nurse is not used to coloured gentlemen," she remarked. "I hope she will get over her fears before long."

When we retired that night, however, Grice came into my room and related what had occurred.

"I was about to pass through the drawing-room which was nearly dark, Mam," she said, "when a tall, thin man in a red cloak came suddenly in front of me saying 'Mahadeva! Mahadeva!' and made a grab at baby. I screamed and pushed his hand away; and then you and her as is the fortune-teller came running up."

"What became of the man?" I asked, because Grice was alone with baby in her arms, when we found her.

"I do not know, Mam ; he seemed to sort of disappear through the air or behind the curtains ; I cannot tell which," said Grice. "All I know is he did not walk ; he just faded; true as Gospel, what I'm telling you ; just disappeared, that's what he did."

When I related what Grice had told me to Madame Indiana next day she only laughed lightly, and said we should not be alarmed at anything Girr Singh did. He was a bit eccentric and imagined every one he saw must be the great Mahavira. That was the worst of having disciples who were overzealous. She asked me to bring Cyril in to her, on the third day, took him on her lap ; and played with him.

Baby seems to have conceived a great fancy for Madame Indiana, but somehow I do not like the way she gets on when he is with her. Perhaps I am a bit jealous that baby should like anyone but myself ; may be I am also somewhat superstitious. Still I did not like to see how she made baby put his two little palms together and then touch his forehead with them : you know how Indian people act when they come to present a petition to you ?

Madame Indiana said : " Reverence should be the first duty taught a child."

" Reverence to God certainly," I rejoined. " But we do not pay reverence like that."

" Reverence to God and one's superiors," said Madame. " What does it matter whom we show reverence to so long as we feel it in our minds."

Then she clapped her hands and several Indians appeared, among whom I recognized Girr Singh from his long red cloak. She beckoned them to approach nearer and pointed to baby, the palms of whose hands she again held together with her fingers. She said something, in Hindustani that I did not understand about baby's thumbs and forefingers which they appeared to gaze at with great admiration, uttering exclamations of joyous surprise.

It was then I recollect ed what she had told me about her mission to this country ; and how she was to recognize the coming sage Mahavira by reason of his right thumb and index finger being longer and more pointed than the left. When Madame Indiana turned baby's right palm upward and again showed the men what she calls the " rascette " or triple lines of the magic bracelet of health, wealth, and happiness on baby's wrist I could stand the thing no longer and took the child from her.

Before I could do so, however, that wretch Girr Singh took up one of baby's feet, put it on his head and then kissed it. I tell you I could have boxed his ears, I felt so angry.

I took baby to my room whither Madame Indiana presently followed me.

"Do not be alarmed, dear," she said. "They mean no harm. We, Indians, have a queer way of reverencing greatness when we see the sure portents of it; so do not let what we do offend you, Mrs. Claire."

"I do not like to see you all acting so stupidly," I said severely, because I was very annoyed. My baby was not brought here to be made a Hindu idol of."

"No, dear," Madame Indiana made answer meekly. "The child has all the markings of greatness. It is written that the next *Arkat* (teacher) shall come as a fair sage to enlighten the world with his teaching. He will hold dominion over life and death by the miracle-working power that is in him. On his brow will be set the sign of Siva, and when his hand is upraised in admonition to men because of their misdeeds the thumb and finger joined will form the perfect 'Ohm' of unity and force. His eyes will be clear and sparkling as the brightest crystal, his brow serene and calm as the moon at full, and round his neck and right wrist will be wound the rascettes or magic circles that denote dominion over mind and matter.—There, dear, do I fatigue you with my talk? If so let me say no more," she concluded.

"But surely, Madame Indiana, you do not take baby for your coming sage?" I inquired with still a considerable amount of warmth.

"One can never tell for certain," the princess replied. "We live in great hopes just now. The portents are all favourable; they point to the near approach of a great and beneficent era. Men have grown wicked beyond belief—aye! and women too. At such periods the great and supreme godhead—Brahma, the all wise, the all knowing, the infinite—sends into this world a sage to warn mankind of their iniquity and to sow anew the seeds of righteousness. To those who believe—who in meekness accept the guidance of the light of faith and knowledge—is he revealed as the messenger of God, as the incarnation of the most high, the miracle-worker that is to be, the all wise teacher of mankind."

Her words seemed to thrill me with a strange and peculiar fascination. I watched her dark eyes as they glowed and flashed with the excitement which her thoughts seemed to engender. She certainly had the power of holding one with her speech, while she poured out her very soul in words.

"And now, Mrs. Claire, may I ask you just a single favour?—she said with a sudden reversion to the ordinary tones she used in her more intimate conversation.

"What is it?" I enquired soothed by her manner.

"May I examine your baby's neck a moment to see if he possesses the magic circle that I see his right hand is marked with?"

That roused my ire again in an instant.

"On no account," I replied vehemently.

"It will not occupy more than a moment," she urged. "I shall be ever so tender with him. I would not hurt a hair of his head for worlds, believe me; and you can hold him in your arms the whole time."

"Madame Indiana, I hope you will put all thoughts about my child out of your head and leave him severely alone," I said as sternly as I could.

"Very well, dear," she remarked quietly. "Do not feel offended; I shall not trouble you now; some other time will do."

She walked softly out of the room, her flowing draperies making a peculiar swish, swish, as they swayed loosely about her.

When I told Grice all that had occurred she opened her eyes in astonishment.

"My word, Mam, this house gives me the creeps, it does. Whenever I walk about in it, I keep thinking every moment as how I shall see a ghost; but may be the ghost his-self would get skeered if he came by accident on one of them Indians in the dark. That Grrr thing would make a corpse walk, he would, if he went near it."

Well, dearest, to make a long story short, I did not stay very long after that in Madame's villa. As Grice said, it gave one the creeps, and that is a sensation few people can enjoy with any comfort for more than a very brief period.

"What? back so soon?" Miss Savage cried when she saw us return. "We thought you were going to make a week of it."

"No, dear; I found I could not endure more than three days of Madame Indiana and her cut-throat looking crew. They were positively getting on my nerves. As for Grice, she was beginning to see ghosts; and when a nurse does that, you know, you can count pretty safely on losing her, either through marriage or by notice."

Miss Savage laughed heartily at this and so, too, did Grice.

"Catch me marrying one of that hobson-jobson crowd, Mam," she said. "Why they'd want me to go this way all day long"—and Grice bobbed her head several times against the palms of her hands as she had seen them do up at the villa.

"Has Madame Indiana discovered the Messiah of her search yet?" Major Savage inquired when he met me a short while afterwards.

"She thought she had discovered him in my Cyril, but I soon undeceived her." I replied with a knowing shake of the head.

"Hullo! how was that?" Major Savage pursued. "Did she take him for the new Mahatma or the old Blavatsky reincarnated?"

"For something of both, I should say," I remarked. "She said the portents were all favourable for the arrival of the great sage who is to recall men to better ways. He is to be distinguished from the rest of mankind by reason of having his right thumb and forefinger longer and more pointed than the left. The fingers of baby's right hand fulfil these conditions."

"I see; and so Madame Indiana concludes that she has discovered the child of destiny. Wonderful, isn't it quite wonderful that mankind should always be looking forward to the coming of a Messiah?"

"What would the world be like were it deprived of its hopes and fears?" I asked.

"A poor place, indeed, for charlatans and rogues and those who live on their fellowmen," Major Savage replied. "I am glad they have not persuaded you to become one of themselves, Mrs. Claire. Women as a general rule fall easy victims to people of this sort because of their emotional natures."

"I know that," I replied "unhappily they evoked in me the strongest of all oppositions—the maternal instinct to protect one's young—and that helped to upset their plans."

"By the way, Mrs. Claire, has Grice ever told you that these people have had their eyes on you and your child some considerable time?" Major Savage then asked.

"No, indeed; has she said so to you?" I enquired.

"Well, not to me personally; but to my man," he replied. "She was telling him not an hour ago that she remembered how a dark-looking man often passed in front of them while she and baby were on the beach. That was before you went

to Madame's villa. She is sure he was one of those people and was watching your baby."

"It is a pity Grice never mentioned the fact to me before," I said.

"It never struck her before in the light it does now. She probably took the man's admiration as directed at herself."

"Very likely she did," I said. "I never took Madame Indiana to be aught but a clever fortune-teller until her actions unmasked the deeper designs of a religious fanatic."

So you see, dearest Arthur, the Madame Indiana I was telling you of in my last letter has fallen very much in my estimation since then. Do not be anxious about baby as he is well looked after by us. We shall be moving back to Richmond very shortly as Major Savage's leave will presently be up and he will have to return to India.

He asked me if I would care to go out to India in the same steamer with himself, but I told him I had no present intention of returning to the country. The truth is, dear, I do not want people to talk as they would be sure to do if they saw me returning to India with Major Savage. It is bad enough their mistaking him for my husband when we are anywhere together, as some old ladies have had the cheek to do here, Madame Indiana among the rest. It would be intolerable if such gossip were to follow me out to India, as it must almost inevitably do were we to travel out together after being seen in each other's company. I like Major Savage in a way, and I think his sister and mother are both exceptionally nice people. They have treated baby and myself just as though we were members of their family, and I shall return the compliment next summer by asking them both to join mother and myself at Margate or some other place. But I do not care to give gossip a handle by letting anybody suppose I am, or intend to be, anything but Mrs. Claire.

Now, dearest Arthur, do write and give me all the news of Beldia. Are there any prospects of your transference to Burranuggar, as you hinted in your last; or are you one of those destined for district work all their lives? You have aid nothing recently of Miss Westerley. What has become of her? Is she still single or has she consoled herself for the loss of Major Savage by eloping with the youngest subaltern in her father's regiment?

Do satisfy a woman's very natural curiosity as to the course of domestic affairs in dear old Beldia. It has occupied

me three days writing all this to you, so I shall look forward to some compensation in return in your reply.

With baby's and my conjoint love,

Your affectionate,
Hetty.

Surgit amari aliquid! I commented as I laid the letter aside. Women are sure to be the ruin of me unless I am more careful. Bah! What fools the best of us are!

By the end of the week Maud Cowper's face as she hung on my arm and pleaded for a kiss had become a memory. She was so very young I imagined that she did not understand the danger that sometimes lurks in a kiss; otherwise it seemed difficult to reconcile the request with aught but perfect innocence. And yet I might never have been exposed to the danger of contact with her had Hetty not left me in the way she had done. And here was Hetty writing about another man as if it was the most natural thing in the world to do. Did she take us all for wax dolls? Bah! these women.

Another week gone by—a week of memories with nothing but imagination to light them. I had thought oftener of Maud Cowper in the interval than I had a right or warrant to, and I was vain enough to imagine she must be thinking of me. However, one does not get the better of forty years without being able to form a fairly accurate guess of what a young woman's feelings are likely to be if she gives way to romantic fancies; and Maud Cowper, I thought was a more than usually romantic girl. The event proved the correctness of my diagnosis. I had a letter from Maud not many days later; I swear I could almost feel it coming.

Here is what she wrote :—

Dear Mr. Claire,

I have made up my mind to leave Burranuggar with all its attractions and return to mother and father.

I do not know what to make of it; I dare say you will think I am sentimental, but I have a fancy for the old quiet country life which I left in such haste under the delusion that it was humdrum and out of touch with modern progress. We live and learn, don't we? I laugh at myself now when I call to mind the great times I had promised myself and the poor result of the reality.

I have frequently thought of late of the peaceful life you lead in out-of-the-way Beldia, all by yourself. Why, how dreadfully lonely you must be at times; still, I should prefer such a life a thousand times to anything I know of in

Burranuggar. Candidly, I have begun to envy you ; hence I am off to see if I cannot rusticate in a similar manner.

I pass through Beldia by the 6 p.m. passenger train on Monday, and shall be delighted if you can spare a few minutes to have a chat.

Tata ! Mind you come.

Yours sincerely,
Maud Cowper.

Poor Maud ! I commented as of old. Ever romantic, ever fanciful, ever in search of an ideal that proves delusive. Like most of us you are destined, I fear, to find that romance too often, alas ! squares sadly with reality. Would that it were otherwise, if only for your sake. But it is one of the immutable laws of nature that inexperience shall learn by experience, and innocence graduate through deceit ; else the world would not be what it is and Eden still exist in every contented human heart.

Monday ! I exclaimed. Why, today is Monday, and she will be passing through this very evening. Glorious ! I'll ask her to break journey for a couple of hours and have dinner. A continuous night and day journey close on three hundred miles is one of the most trying experiences you can imagine in India and Maud is sure to welcome the interruption. She can continue her travels by the next train. The prospect of meeting her quite excited me ; I felt more like a schoolboy about to attend a tryst with his first love than a man with the indurated nerves and ripe experience of more than forty summers.

Human nature after all is human nature.

CHAPTER XXII

“NOT tired of Beldia yet, I hope ? ” said I softly in Maud’s ear as tip-toeing noiselessly up I caught her in my arms as she stood drinking in the fresh morning air at the verandah window.

“Not yet ; nor of you, Dennis,” she replied coyly, letting her head nestle against my shoulder.

“Thank you darling ; I’m glad of that,” I went on. “It would be altogether too dreadful to lose you just now when I am beginning to feel that—that—I love you so—so much.” At each use of the word “that” I planted a kiss on her fresh luscious lips and drawing her lissome form closer, folded her to my bosom.

We stood thus a few minutes lost in the raptures of a new-found bliss, her face upturned to mine, her eyes full of the divine rapture of love, and her mouth piquant for kisses.

“Do you regret your decision ? darling ? ” I asked her tenderly as we kissed each other again. “Because if you do, remember there is yet time to retract before I write to George.”

“Dear, I regret nothing ; I retract nothing. My only fear is that I may be a nuisance to you; that you may tire of me, and long to have your wife and child back once more with you. What would become of me then ? ”

Her eyes filled with tears at the thought and presently she turned swiftly and hid her face in her arm.

“Dear darling, do not let such thoughts worry you ; do not conjure up imaginary fears,” I said reassuringly, stroking back the wisps of silky hair that had strayed from the rest. “Have I not given you my word ? have I not sworn to look after you ? and do you think I would be such a cad as to desert you ? —No, dearest Maud, for good or ill we are now bound together for all time ; for good or ill you are

mine and I am yours. I shall never desert you, dearest darling ; no never.—Let me dry your tears."

She looked up smiling through wet eyes.

" Dennis, I love you—I love you, oh ! so much," she whispered softly. " Let me stay with you always—always. I will be very good and do everything you wish. Only let me stay with you, dear, won't you ? "

" Dear darling, that is my sole desire ; the one and only wish of my heart. Stay with me certainly ; always and for ever. I want you now more than ever I did before."

" Say you love me then ; just once, say it," she pleaded softly.

" I love you, darling," I repeated, catching her more tightly to my heart and imprinting on her lips the kisses they were mutely pleading for.

" Come let us go inside now and I will write to George," I remarked presently. " We may as well have it over and done with, or they will cause enquiries to be made regarding your whereabouts when they learn from your father and mother that you have not yet reached home as you should have done three days ago."

" What will you say in your letter, Dennis ? " she asked shyly as we walked together to the office room, my arm round her waist and hers circling mine and held prisoner on the other side.

" Only that you broke journey here on your way home and as you like Beldia better than Murree and the climate seems to suit you, we have resolved to keep house together."

" Is that all ? "

" I will add a few lines telling him to give your sister Rachel my assurances that I shall act honourably by you as soon as matters can be equitably arranged with my wife. Will that do, my love ? "

" Yes, dearest," she replied ; " that will do.—But wait," she continued as an after-thought—" you might also say, Dennis, that I am writing to mother and father, explaining everything ; and that I hope Rachel will not be angry with me."

" Very well, darling. I am sure neither Rachel nor Towner will be angry when they realize that we were to get married the earliest possible moment."

With that we went in and I immediately sat down at my desk to write Towner the disagreeable letter that was to acquaint him with the fact that Maud had taken up with me,

and was even now living in my house as its present and future mistress. There would be an explosion, of course, I knew. The incident was certain to strain the excellent relations hitherto subsisting between myself and the Towners, and which might have continued but for what had occurred. Such things, however, could not now be helped. Life is a bundle of accidents after all, and the man who cannot risk something for the possession of a pretty girl does not deserve to have one.

Maud moved about the room putting things to rights, for however well trained your Indian servant may be he is apt to grow slack and careless unless the memsahib's eye is there to keep him up to the mark. During Hetty's long absence it goes without saying that things had slackened somewhat, for although they had the seeming of being well ordered to my eye, yet the moment a woman entered, her more delicate sense of the fitness of things at once detected where the offence lay and proceeded to apply the needed remedy.

It was with a pleased sense of homely comfort, therefore, that I heard Maud go pottering about the room. Her present activities reminded me of her sister Rachel, and promised some at least of the results which Rachel Towner had achieved in making her home the comfortable place it had become for her husband and child. Rachel had the sense of cleanliness and well-ordered regularity inborn in her; she was not content to leave things to her servants while she expended her superfluous energies in visiting public institutions and killing her own time by curtailing that of her neighbours. She was what I considered a model wife, and if Maud displayed any of the same characteristics I could consider myself lucky in having secured her as a companion. She had been three days in the house and already a subtle, almost indefinable change had begun to manifest itself, both in the demeanour of the servants and the nature of the work they rendered about the premises. It was evident they realized the change that had come over the sahib's menage with the arrival of the tall haughty-looking young Miss-sahib; and they altered their attitude accordingly to suit the changed circumstances of the case.

Maud Cowper had the makings of a handsome woman; that was evident from the graceful poise of her head, her easy movements, and the general manner in which she carried her person. Already the spell of her fascinating personality was weaving itself round me to the utter snapping asunder of such domestic ties and affections as a man weaves for himself when he marries. Already I felt the personality of Hetty slipping into the background as the more living presence of Maud Cowper took its place. Can a man love

two women at one and the same time?—love them, that is, with the same devotion, the same selfless passion, the same ardour that he puts into a single and only love? I do not pretend to answer the question with any degree of finality; but just as every division of energy lessens the intensity of the force applied to a particular object, so I imagine must it ever be with love. Division here also lessens intensity; and where love is divided it may be likened to affection which is widespread and may cover a variety of objects without being particularly concentrated on a single individual.

I had finished my letter to Towner and sent it off to the post office; Maud was sitting in the drawing-room reading a book and I was similarly employed over the morning's paper when without the least warning the bomb we had both been inwardly fearing, though not perhaps expecting at that precise moment, burst in our very midst.

"Any one at home?" a woman's voice called from the verandah—a voice that seemed to freeze the very blood in my veins in one petrifying act of glaciation. A glance at Maud showed that I had not been dreaming, for it was quite evident she had heard the inquiry as well and was hardly less discomposed by it than myself.

There was the light patter of a woman's footfall on the china matting outside, a momentary pause, and the next instant before either of us could say anything, or escape from the room, Rachel Towner stood in the doorway, leaning lightly with both hands on the handle of her parasol.

"Good morning!" she said frigidly without the least attempt at specifying either of us individually. "I'm glad I find you both at home. I'm sorry my visit could not be announced more ceremoniously but as I saw no servants about I had to announce myself." She walked into the room as she spoke and took a chair.

Neither Maud nor I had as yet ventured to say a word. We were too utterly surprised to speak, and could only maintain a silence which results from profound and overwhelming amazement.

"I suppose you know the object of my visit, Mr. Claire?" Rachel Towner presently turned to me to say.

"I—I daresay you have come—a—about Maud," I faltered.

"Yes; it's about Maud," she confirmed. "I—."

"Do not worry about me please," Maud broke in, still keeping her eyes glued on her book; "I am well able to look after myself."

"So it would seem," her sister snapped. "If you could only say the same about your good name."

"My good name does not need looking after; it takes care of itself," said Maud peevishly.

"Then it wants a guardian badly," Rachel retorted tartly.

"And even if it does, what concern is that of yours?" Maud asked with flashing eyes.

"It concerns me to this extent, Maud Cowper, that whatever reflects on you reflects on me; whatever tarnishes your good name, tarnishes mine; though to a lesser degree. When people see you and say that is Maud Cowper who is the mistress of a married man they soon begin to ask who and what her people are that they should permit such a thing. That's where I come in; don't you see? That's where the folly of your action touches me."

"It won't be for very long, Mrs. Towner. I shall put everything to rights so far as Maud is concerned, I interrupted, hoping to prevent a quarrel.

"Yes; you do two wrongs to put a single one right, Rachel Towner turned to me to say. "You first wrong Maud, and then to put that right you go and wrong your wife."

"It is unprofitable to discuss such things now." I said evasively.

"Most people find it unprofitable to take stock of their consciences when there is a likelihood of unpleasant reminders; they prefer to make good resolutions, hoping to bury the unpleasantness under a canopy of floral offerings," Rachel Towner said sarcastically.

"I suppose that is it. We are all liable to err," I admitted lamely. "I am prepared to do the right thing by Maud."

"The right thing after the wrong sounds very plausible," Rachel Towner sneered. "But in the meantime what do you propose doing?"

"In what way?" I asked.

"In the way of setting the wrong right at once," she replied.

"What would you have me do? I am quite willing to do everything in my power that may be necessary," I said. "In fact it was only this morning I wrote to Towner explaining the whole situation to him and promising to see the thing through in the only way that is possible for me."

"It took you three days to make up your mind to write, nevertheless. In the meantime you forgot that the world

was discussing your affairs already with the freedom scandal loves."

"The world discussing my affairs? It must have precious little else to discuss then, Mrs. Towner," I said with an effort to laugh the matter off.

"It has—so far as Beldia goes, I should say," she continued in her old style.

"O, Beldia is not the world by a long chalk, thank goodness," I said warming up.

"Perhaps not. Still it did not take me long to hear in Burranuggar what Beldia was talking about; did it?" she asked pointedly.

"You are well favoured in your correspondents without a doubt, Mrs. Towner. That is all I can say," I returned.

"And you have to thank your local position, Mr. Claire, for the interest your neighbours take in your domestic concerns," she answered.

"May I ask what those neighbours have been kind enough to say?" I asked frigidly.

"Not very much that would bear repetition from a pulpit, you may be sure," she rapped out.

"O, pulpits are not singular in that regard, I fear," I said sarcastically.

"At least they refrain from giving scandal even if they cannot always reprove it by name," said Rachel Towner with spirit.

"They haven't the same opportunities, maybe. The giving or reproofing of scandal is quite as much a matter of opportunity as of inclination, I should say. I happen to have struck inclination and opportunity at precisely the same moment seemingly," I said with a bitter laugh.

"You have made your opportunity serve your inclinations very well, at all events," she sneered. "That is why people say Mr. Claire, the Collector, has temporarily taken unto himself another wife—a young woman whom he discovered during a visit he paid recently to Burranuggar."

"I wish people would mind their own business," Maud exclaimed angrily, rising to her feet.

"Scandal must have its scalp, Maud; you know that as well as I do; otherwise how was I to discover what had become of you!"

"Have they mentioned Maud by name?" I asked, half fearful lest the answer should be in the affirmative.

"O, they've got the whole story pat already ; you may trust servants for knowing their employer's business," Mrs. Towner made answer. "They know that you spent a week in Burra-nuggar where you met an attractive young lady—a Miss Maud Cowper—with whom you fell desperately in love at first sight. The attraction was apparently mutual, they are good enough to admit, since they say that the young person has now come definitely to live with Mr. Claire. They do not mention George and myself directly of course ; but they knew where to send the earliest intimation of the affair, all the same. So you see the story is accurate enough, even though it may not be quite charitable."

"They can say what they like," said Maud with a proud toss of her head. "They are kind enough to allow me some share of good looks ; they may not be indisposed later to make some allowance for good intentions on my part."

"Don't be silly, Maud. A woman who takes away another woman's husband cannot be said to have good intentions in what she does," Rachel said angrily.

"I have taken away nobody's husband. You know that quite as well as I do, Rachel ; and it is cruel of you to speak in the manner you do," Maud retorted with a blanched face.

"My wife has left me of her own accord and is fully aware of the consequences," I put in, hoping thereby to pour oil on troubled waters.

"That is no justification for your conduct," Mrs. Towner answered sharply.

"I am not trying to justify my conduct," I said deprecatingly. "My only intention is to act honourably by Maud."

"Are you prepared to marry my sister, Mr. Claire ?" asked Rachel somewhat mollified.

"That is my intention, as soon as I can arrange for a divorce from my present wife," I said.

"O, that will take months and months," said Rachel Towner. "In the meantime I propose that Maud should return with me to her parents."

"Never," said Maud with a resolution that thrilled me to the quick.

"Now don't be silly, Maud," said her sister, not unkindly I thought. "It will stop people's tongues if you are out of the way for a time. You can both get married when matters have been properly arranged ; if that is still your intention."

"Let people's tongues wag as much as they like ; Dennis has chosen me and I have chosen Dennis, and so long as

we feel that we are suited to each other, I do not see what concern it is of anybody else," Maud exclaimed.

"Mr Claire I appeal to you," Rachel Towner turned to me to say. "Do you not value my sister's good name sufficiently to see that what I propose is for the best?"

"I value Maud's good name as much as my own, and I shall do all that lies in my power to keep it unsullied," said I quietly; "but I cannot ask her to go away with you as you suggest. It would look uncommonly like deserting her; and thank God, I haven't come down to that yet. If Maud chooses to stay with me she will be mistress of my house and affections as much as if she already possessed my name; and I can assure her in your presence that I mean to give her my name at the earliest possible moment."

"Maud, let me appeal to you in the name of father and mother," Rachel turned again to her sister to say. "Just think how mother will feel when she hears of this, dear; just try to realise what her thoughts will be like when she thinks of all that she has done for you, all the love she has lavished on you, her favourite daughter, only to see it come to this — that her girl, her loved child, Maud, has thrown away her good name, has valued her instructions so lightly that she has gone to live with a stranger. Maud, don't you see how it will hurt mother?"

She applied her handkerchief to her eyes, and I could see that Maud had hidden her face in her lap. I rose very softly, walked to the farthest window in the room, and pretended to discover something interesting in the landscape beyond. It would have been clearly improper on my part, I felt, to try to influence Maud in any way. So I left them to have it out together.

When I turned round again I saw that Rachel Towner had dropped on her knees beside her sister and with both arms encircling her waist was pouring forth a torrent of affectionate appeal.

"No, dear; do not be vexed with me," I heard Maud reply at last. "I have made up my mind to do as I am doing and I shall abide by the consequences, whatever they may be."

With that Rachel rose to her feet, wiped her eyes, and made ready to go.

"Won't you stay, dear, and rest awhile?" Maud urged. "You must be tired after your long train journey?"

"No, dearest Maud, I must get back at once to Burra-nuggar; George is sure to be anxious if I am very long away," Rachel replied softly.

The two sisters had walked with their arms round each other to the verandah and I followed to see if I might not be able to induce Mrs. Towner to change her mind.

"Stay at least to breakfast," Maud urged again.

"No, dear ; do not be angry," Rachel answered in her old kindly manner. "When you are mistress in your own house and have a right to ask me to breakfast or dinner I shall gladly come—and—and—bring George with me too. Till then I cannot."

They kissed each other very tenderly and parted, Rachel Towner turning away and going down the steps without so much as wishing me "good day," though I acquitted her of any intentional rudeness, as I could see by the continual use she made of her handkerchief, and the fact that she kept her parasol studiously between herself and the house, that she was crying.

Later in the day I ascertained from the station staff that she had arrived by the early morning train and had gone back by the very first passenger train leaving Beldia for Burranuggar.

Maud was in a depressed mood the whole of that day but recovered her spirits in the evening after I had walked out with her to the Club and back.

CHAPTER XXIII

IT was not very long after this while getting through some office work one day I heard a woman's voice outside inquiring of the chaprassi on duty at the door whether the sahib was in. The voice sounded familiar enough, though for the moment I could not fix up the speaker. However, politeness required that I should make my presence known without standing on the ceremony of a formal call, and so I went out and had a pleasant little shock in finding that the caller was none other than Kate Westerley.

"This is a pleasant surprise, Miss Westerley," I said from the top of the stone steps. "Won't you come in?"

"I'm glad at least it isn't a shock. I thought it might produce a shock to find me visiting you in your lonely den," Kate answered with a laugh. "However, there was no help for it. I'm on the verge of distraction because I can't find John; so I've come to you as the next most advisable person, and I hope you'll help me."

She mounted the steps as she delivered herself of this exordium and held out her hand when she reached the top.

"Quite the right way of doing things, I'm sure," I said cheerily. "Is the matter very important?"

"It may not seem so to you, Mr. Claire; it does to me," she replied, "I've been round to Mr. Kavanagh's but they tell me he is out and will not be back for some time. Isn't it exasperating—just when I was hoping to find him in?"

"Have you come all the way from Somma for this?" I inquired.

"All the way," she replied demurely; "and there is the return journey in prospect still."

"Without even the pleasure of having seen John in the interval, eh?" I remarked with a laugh.

"Not even that poor satisfaction," she replied.

"Well——well, come in and unburden your soul," said I holding back the screen hanging in front of the office-room door near which we had been standing.

She stepped in, took the seat I placed for her, and undoing a button or two of her left glove pulled out a slip of paper.

"I kept it there for convenience and safety," she laughed as she handed the missive to me. "Letters are such a nuisance when you have to carry them about with you."

"Am I to read it?" I inquired, still holding the paper in the folded condition in which it had been given to me.

"Yes, do," she said. "It concerns Mrs. Bodh, about whom we have all been so concerned of late."

"Indeed!" I exclaimed, unfolding the sheet. "It is not a message for John then."

"No——no, read it," she laughed, "as though I would show you John's messages."

The letter was written in pencil on a piece of foolscap. What I read was as under:—

Dear Miss Westerley,

Just a few lines to assure you of my wife's safety and to thank you for all your kindness to her and my little son. We have not found the boy yet, but hope, with God's help, to do so ere long.

Please show this letter to Mr. Kavanagh and ask him as a favour not to trouble any longer about Mrs. Bodh. She is quite well and sends her kind regards to you.

You may see us before long, but please do not let your recognition betray us, as we desire above all to recover possession of our son and it may defeat our purpose were we known.

Expressing once again both my own and my wife's heartiest thanks for all your kindness to us,

Believe me,
Yours sincerely,
M. N. Bodh.

"The envelope bore the Beldia post-mark, with yesterday's date," said Miss Westerley the moment I had finished reading the letter. "Hence I infer it must have been posted here."

"Quite likely," said I. "I am glad Mrs. Bodh is safe and with her husband."

"So am I," Miss Westerley made answer. "I was beginning to fear the worst——"

A footfall sounded on the matting outside, and without word of warning the screen was raised and the next instant Maud Cowper stood in the doorway. She seemed surprised to find a young woman in the office with me, hesitated a moment, then stepped back with a half-expressed apology: "I—I'm sorry."

Kate Westerley's eyes dilated in astonishment as they fixed those of Maud.

"Who's she?" she asked in an excited whisper when Maud had withdrawn.

"My wife," said I quietly.

"Gammon!" said Kate derisively.

"It's the truth," I asseverated.

"What's become of Mrs. Hetty then?" Kate pursued.

"O—she—she has taken leave to stay at home," I remarked with timid apology.

"Whew!—bigamy!" said Kate with quite a woman's leap to conclusions. Then she began to sing: "One little, two little, three little, four little, five little blinking wives," and laughed softly to herself.—"Who is she?" she again asked with emphasis on the second words.

"My wife, I tell you," I repeated.

"Gammon!—tell that to the daisies. You are not married, surely. Who is she?—her name—er—before she became—er—your wife, Mr. Claire?"

"Her name was Miss Cowper—Miss Maud Cowper."

"Her people?"

"Her sister is Mrs. Towner."

"What?—Mrs. Rachel Towner—the wife of the Under Secretary?"

"The same."

"Gracious! Will wonders never cease! But I congratulate you, Mr. Claire; she's simply superb. Did you see how imperiously she looked at me; as much as to say how 're you! She's superb; glorious. I must make her acquaintance at once. Introduce me, please."

"With pleasure," said I, gratified as much by Kate Westerley's condescension in not affecting to be shocked as by her delicate flattery of my taste." Let us go into the drawing-room. We are sure to find Maud there."

I held the screen back for her to pass out.

"And this is the position you were kind enough to design for me at one time, eh?—Men are fickle ever," said Kate with a gurgle as she tripped lightly along the verandah to the drawing-room.

"Maud—I have brought an old friend of mine, Miss Westerley, to see you.—Miss Westerley, this is my wife," I said as I presented the two to each.

"How d'you do, Mrs. Claire," said the more gushing and warm-hearted Kate. "I called to see your husband on a matter of business. I'm so very glad to make your acquaintance."

Maud seemed a trifle confused at our appearance, but Kate Westerley's genial humour appeared to reassure her, for she smiled as she returned the other's warm handshake. What her thoughts were at being thus openly addressed as Mrs. Claire, or at my being alluded to as her husband I did not either immediately after Kate Westerley's departure enquire, or at any future time endeavour to discover. It was enough for me that she should have a friend about much her own age among those with whom it would be her lot to associate at no distant date, and so I was contented to let things remain as they were.

It was barely a minute that we had been in the drawing-room when notes of music were wafted to us through the open doors, followed instantly by such a tapage among all the dogs in the neighbourhood, as set our curiosity on edge and made us anxious to discover the cause of the disturbance. We quickly found the source of the trouble to be a couple of aged native musicians who were scraping with much zest on sarangis, as the Indian violin is called, while in front of them danced a young woman of comely appearance and sylph-like form who kept wonderful time to the music.

It was not quite the usual thing for itinerant musicians of this class to enter the compounds of houses in which Europeans reside, as the sahib being generally at work and the memsahib having ideas of her own regarding execution, the efforts of strangers were apt to be unappreciated. Rama, the *mali*, was therefore doing his ineffectual best to persuade the intruders not to advance any further. They, however, paid no heed to his admonitions, the men applying themselves with great vigour to the instruments, which they carried strapped to their waists, and the woman moving gracefully about in front of them, the gingles on her arms and ankles keeping rhythmic time to the music.

Our appearance on the verandah was a sufficient encouragement for them to approach the house, which they did at the same methodical rate of progression they had

hitherto used, without the least endeavour to hasten forward. We stood and watched the trio as they drew nearer to us. The young woman naturally held most of our attention, not merely by reason of her youth and undoubted beauty, but also because of the grace of her movements. She was dressed in a many-pleated skirt of vari-coloured cloth which swayed to and fro with every motion of her sinuous body and gave to her dancing quite a charm of its own. Her bosom was encased in a tight-fitting maroon velvet bodice, the edges of which were gold-embroidered; on her forehead dangled a small brass or gold pendant which by means of gold embroidery was so dexterously interwoven with her hair that it seemed perfectly secure from loss; while over the head itself she wore a light pink muslin veil the ends whereof were gathered in at her waist.

Her companions were dressed pretty much alike, that is to say they wore the long white coats affected by Hindus, dhotis looped round the loins, and cumberbunds or waist cloths, made of red material wrapped loosely about their middles. It would have been inconvenient, not to say tiresome, to have had to carry in their arms the heavy stringed instruments on which they scraped, while marching about the country; but here necessity, ever fertile in expedients, had found a way out in the cumberbund as the most handy means, both for relieving the hands of the weight of the instrument, and leaving their use free to the executants. The sarangis thus reposed peacefully on the cumberbunds. The men were bearded which is more the exception than the rule amongst most Hindus; but here again their mendicancy was probably a reason for leaving their locks unshorn since the caste-marks which showed between the front loops of their turbans pointed to them as professional beggars.

We watched them with fascinated interest as they approached, the gingles on the bows of the players beating a rhythmic time to those on the girl's ankles. She was moving her arms about with the slow flexions of the Eastern dancer, advancing, gyrating, receding, but drawing ever nearer and nearer. The musicians were now bent to their task with redoubled energy; they swayed and shook, beat out the time with their feet and urged the girl to greater and yet greater exertions by their exclamations.

"Do dirkee; do dirkee!" was what they said; and she repeated this interspersed with the exclamations I have mentioned. What the whole thing meant I never stopped to enquire as I gave the thing no thought being fascinated by sight of the girl, whom I felt sure I had seen before.

Kate Westerley, too, seemed to find the chords of recollection touched to an unusual degree by sight of the young

woman. She was leaning across the verandah railing watching her with the fixed attention we observe when trying to find the association which certain ideas have called up; and I could see that there appeared a corresponding recognition in the dancer's eyes from the manner in which she tried to signal a warning, as it were, to the other.

As for Maud, she looked on with the disinterested attention which politeness required, the curiosity of her visitor in the outdoor proceedings being an all-sufficient reason for her own presence in the verandah as a spectator. Several of our servants had come out on hearing the music of the sarangis and were standing at odd corners of the house watching the proceedings. Although these were not visible to me, their presence was sufficiently indicated from the direction of the glances shot out by the dancer and her companions, while all doubt on the point was set at rest by the vigour with which stones were occasionally hurled by unseen hands at such intrusive pi-dogs as being unused to "a concord of sweet sounds" were determined to add their voices to the cacophony of the moment.

Our visitors were now within a couple of yards of the verandah, the musicians were plying their bows with the verve of men who feel that life's best pleasures lie in the extraction of weird homophony off single chords or groups of well-adjusted wires, and our dancer was stepping out to the cadence towards the ladies, when a turn of one of the men's faces revealed to me the well-known features of Mahadeo Narayan Bodh. His face was covered with a long black beard, which being parted in the centre was looped up in a whorl on either side behind his ears, giving the jaw a massive appearance. From the hue and texture of his present garments I inferred that he was no longer a Yogi or ascetic; but what the nature of the influence was that had been brought to bear in order to dispose him to the new transformation I never could properly discover, either now or in the future. Bodh carried himself with the indifference of a stranger, from which, and the recollection of the letter Miss Westerley had shown me but a while back, I inferred that he wished to preserve his incognito. Be that as it may, I certainly had no present intention of disobliging him in that particular, especially as I almost on the instant made the further discovery that the dancer was none other than Temeena Bodh whose disappearance had raised in our minds the most horrid suspicions of the fate that had probably overtaken her.

So this was the method Bodh and his wife had chosen for the discovery of their child, I mentally commented. Well, it certainly had the advantage of being picturesque even

though success might not have seemed very promising. Mrs. Bodh looked slimmer and more fine drawn about the features than when I had seen her with Kate Westerley in the pleasure-garden near Gosai Ghat; but this was more than compensated for by the healthier tone of her skin which the open air life and continual exercise served to keep fresh and healthful. The sun had tanned her face, arms, and feet a shade or two browner than before, but here again I thought, it rather an improvement than otherwise; and as neither Mr. Bodh nor his wife appeared to take much notice of the circumstance, I concluded that they had made up their minds to endure whatever inconveniences the life had in store for them rather than forfeit the only chance that offered itself of rescuing their infant son.

As I have already had occasion to remark, Kate Westerley seemed as much absorbed in the woman as I had been in the man. She had in all likelihood discovered her true identity much sooner than I had Bodh's; but the request for reticence was doubtless as much a determining factor in her estimation as I held it to be in the case of the husband; and so neither of us had as yet shown by word or sign that we had seen anything peculiar in the stranger. Who the second musician was I could not at the time determine. He had the appearance of being a hoary bearded bard of the ordinary itinerant type one runs across almost every day in India; but whether his association with our two friends was in the nature of an accident or design I was unable to say till some time afterwards.

"Do dirkee!—do dirkee!" the monotonous chant and its equally monotonous response went on uninterruptedly during the whole time the trio were before us. They did not pause to give us the benefit of a special *pirouette* on the part of Madame Bodh nor did Bodh or his companion execute a well rehearsed *pas seul* on the gravelly path. Instead, as they moved close under the verandah, Tameena Bodh with a swift gesture, passed a small slip of paper to Kate Westerley which the latter as dexterously seized. Without an instant's pause the three then went on, past the house, to the opposite gate, leaving behind them a group of disappointed servants who had not been without hopes, I daresay, of inveigling them into their quarters and there indulging the Indian servant's fondness for a surreptitious concert in the shade of the nearest tree.

"The note is addressed to you, Mr. Claire," said Kate Westerley, handing it over to me after a momentary glance at the superscription. "I suppose it was for the purpose of delivering it that they came through the compound."

"They might with less risk and equal certainty of its reaching its destination have entrusted it to the post office," I said when I had read it through; "the contents are almost identical with those of the letter you showed me a while ago. He thanks me for my efforts to discover his wife and child and trusts I shall ask the police not to relax their vigilance in regard to the discovery of those who have kidnapped his son. "This is what he says about his wife," I added, preparing to read from the open note in my hand:—

"My wife has been spared to me by what I cannot but regard as the merciful intervention of Heaven on behalf of those who put their trust in it. In the first transports of despair at the loss of her son she left home intending to destroy herself. Fortunately she was discovered wandering about the country by some friends who knew both of us and who took care of her while they telegraphed to me at the Math at Benares whither they knew I was then going. I have returned since and learned of all that has happened during my absence, including the kidnapping of my son. We have resolved now to try and find the boy, after which, if it please heaven I shall continue my peculiar mission."

"Queer guise in which to set about the task of discovering the boy, isn't it?" I said as I crumpled up the note in my hand.

"I suppose it is the best they can think of for gaining the intelligence they are after," said Kate.

"It is the only way in which they can get admission into private houses and temples if it is their child whom they are looking for," Maud here interjected, now for the first time evincing an interest in the proceedings. "Are they known to you, Dennis?"

"Yes; one of the men was a member of our Service until a short while back when he threw up his appointment and all the prospects he ever had and took to this sort of life. The woman is his wife. I have not the least idea who the other man is: probably a friend of theirs and swayed by the same crude notions."

"India is the land of contrasts," said Kate Westerley. "Side by side with the most refined breeding one comes across the grossest superstition. It seems such a patch-work civilization, this Eastern one that we find in this country."

"It is only a type of human nature, after all," I replied, watching the retreating figures of Bodh, his wife, and friend who had now emerged on the high road and were being accosted by some idlers, without doubt with a view to Mrs. Bodh giving them a sample of her vocal powers for an hour or two at so much a head. "We are always progressing

towards ideals which we never seem able to reach. Whether India will ever shake off the trammels of habits and customs that have become ingrained in her people by centuries of tolerance is one of those questions no one can answer just yet. She may perhaps succeed, or she may be thrown back in her development by events of which we have no conception at present. It is the same with human nature as far back as history can take us."

"I always thought Mr. Bodh a bit of a crank on the question of religion," said Kate. "Do you remember those exclamations of his at odd moments 'Are Ram ! Ram !' and the like ? He is continually making use of them. But poor Tameena ! why she should have to endure a life like that passes my understanding."

"She is only fulfilling her ideal of wisely devotion," said I quietly. "Bodh's exclamations are but the sighings after peace of the spirit within us. We all make use of similar ejaculations when tired nature would lay down the burden of life that has become too oppressive."

"Well,—I had better be trotting, or I shall never meet John," said Kate with her usual irrelevance. "I have to get back to Somma by the very first train or father and mother may think that I've been kidnapped too."

"Stay over lunch," I suggested. "I shall send round to see if Kavanagh has returned ; in the meantime Maud can make you comfortable."

"This is really very good of you," exclaimed Kate when Maud had added her entreaties to mine. "I had better send mother a wire to say that I shall be back in time for dinner."

With that I left the two together and retired to my office in order to dispose of such work as I had not been able to attend to owing to Kate Westerley's unexpected irruption into my study.

CHAPTER XXIV

IT was some months after this that going into my office one morning I found lying on my desk a letter from Hetty. It bore an English postmark and had evidently come in by the latest mail.

"My dear Arthur,—If I may still call you by the old familiar name despite the altered condition of our relations to one another," she wrote,—

"I felt impelled to write to you just once again as there are some things I wish to say which I cannot very well say to anyone else : so pardon the liberty.

"I met Kate Westerley and her husband, John Kavanagh, in one of the Departmental Stores the other day. You never told me they were engaged. They were married a short while back, and are preparing to return to India, as Kavanagh's short leave is nearly up.

"They were extremely kind to me, especially Kate, and I must recall all the unpleasant and unkind things I may have said regarding her. I did not know before she was so nice.

"They insisted on my having tea with them. It is easy to see that these two are very much in love with one another. Kate has grown more attractive, if I may say so, than before ; as to John Kavanagh, he seems to have shed some of his old bashfulness, and is now quite the ideal husband.

"Colonel Westerley, she told me, has retired and has settled in the country. Mrs. Westerley has not been keeping good health lately ; and that decided it. She has greatly improved in health since coming here. I have promised to call on the Westerleys at the first opportunity.

I had a visit the other day from Miss Savage. Her brother —Major Savage—has returned to India, and expects to go on active service before long. But what Miss Savage especially admired was baby. "How Cyril has grown," she remarked. "A thumping, robust little fellow." She was always fond of Cyril, and I like her all the better for it.

"There, now, I have given you all the news. I shall keep this letter open all the same, in case I think of anything else. The mail is not due to close for a day or two."

"P.S.—Such dreadful news! What ever shall I do? I feel quite frantic. Baby—my own darling little Cyril—has disappeared. I feel sure he has been kidnapped by that horrid Madame Indiana and her gang of cut-throats. I have been to Scotland Yard with Grice, and made her tell them all she knows. She was out in the Park with baby, it seems; never let him out of her sight except for one brief second when a stranger spoke to her; and, lo! when she turned again the pram was empty and baby gone. Scotland Yard officials think she is speaking the truth; but I felt so angry that I paid her up and let her go——"

"I sent you a cable within the hour."

(A cable? I commented! Curious that I never received it—I wonder if Maud, perhaps——.)

"Scotland Yard has since written to say that they have searched Madame Indiana's premises which were found empty. They have their men on watch on all the major ports of embarkation; but so far have discovered nothing suspicious. They are, however, continuing their inquiries.

"That is as far as things have gone, and I leave you to imagine what the state of my feelings are.

"Yours sincerely,
Hetty."

I folded the letter up carefully and placed it in the inner pocket of my coat. It was clear Hetty expected me to do something to help her; but, in what way, I pondered.

At dinner that night I remarked a subtle, almost imperceptible, change in Maud's demeanour towards me.

"By the way, Dennis," she presently observed in a most matter-of-fact way, as if the thought had only just occurred to her, "what has become of your late wife, Hetty?"

"I am not interested in Hetty—my late wife—as you choose to call her. You know that as well as anyone; or should by now, at any rate, Maud," I added somewhat nettled by her tone and manner. "I have only one wife in all the world, now, and you are she, Maud. I have plighted you my troth, and I mean to abide by it."

That seemed to mollify her a bit; but not quite, because she went on after a while.

"I was only wondering whether she might not take it into her head to write to you occasionally. There are so many

things in common between you two, you know, that she may want your advice upon some of them."

"Well, as a matter of fact, I did have a letter from Hetty by the mail," I admitted, sensing the danger that Maud was quite aware of the circumstance and probably also of its contents.

"You did not think it right that I should see it, eh?"

"The letter you see, Maud, deals with certain matters that concern my duties as a District Magistrate, so I had to treat it as a demi-official document."

"And keep it in your coat pocket. Tra-la! That's as good an excuse as any. However, let that pass. I had a letter from Rachel this morning enclosing an invitation to the Government House ball. She wants us to go to Burrnagar and stay with them a few days. I wrote off immediately accepting the offer."

"That's right," I said, "I shall be glad to come."

Maud made no comment as if the question of my going with her or not was a matter of supreme indifference.

CHAPTER XXV

THERE are few scenes that appeal more strongly to the imagination than a well conducted ball; and that those at Government House are well conducted goes without saying. The brilliant lights, the mellowed notes of the music as it is wafted through the stately hall, the dresses of the dancers, especially those of the ladies, all combine to create an impression that is not easily effaced.

Maud, I thought, had done herself up particularly well for the occasion. She looked bewitching; and what is more she knew it as I noted from the slight toss of her head and the sparkle of triumph in her eyes as she caught my first flush of admiration when I beheld her.

"You do look lovely, Maud," I whispered in her ear as I danced my first with her.

"Think so?" she answered with what I fancied was a note of indifference in her tones.

"Quite sure," I replied with all the gallantry I could impart with my intonation. "You do credit to your husband."

She said nothing, but presently remarked: "Remember you owe a duty to Rachel."

"Yes, I know," I replied. "I shall dance the next with her."

With that I set her down beside her sister as the music ceased.

My duty by Rachel duly performed, I wandered out into the vestibule for a breath of cool air, and ran up against, of all persons, John Kavanagh.

"Why, this is grand!" said the latter with a hearty handshake. "Who'd ever have thought of meeting you here. Quite like old times, down Beldia way, eh?"

"Not quite," I corrected laughing at the boyish spirits still apparent in him. "You were then, you know, on your own; whereas now you have—."

"Kate," he interjected. "Yes, by Harry! But how did you know I was married to Kate?"

"Little birds whisper these things," said I.

I could see from his manner that he knew of the rift in the lives of Hetty and myself; but he made not the slightest allusion to the subject.

"I had a letter from—from Hetty," I faltered. "By the way—that reminds me—you had better read the letter yourself. Here it is. I showed it to Towner, and he gave it back to me just as we were all getting ready to come to the ball. All he said about it was—"We have already taken such action as we consider necessary"—which is rather Delphic in its obscurity as far as I am concerned."

With that I drew forth Hetty's letter and handed it to him.

He read it with care as I could see from the quiet flicker of a smile which stole over his countenance at the allusions to Kate and himself. It was when he came to the second part, however—that in which Hetty narrated the kidnapping of Cyril—that his interest seemed to quicken.

"By Jove, Claire!" He remarked as he handed back the letter. "I've been deputed for special duty in connection with a similar kidnapping case sent out by Scotland Yard. I wonder if it's the same. Looks uncommonly like it, doesn't it? Especially when we couple Towner's remark to you about Government taking the needed action."

"It does," I agreed. "When do you begin on your special job?"

"I shall go down to Beldia tomorrow. I have a good man there, as you know, in Sub-Inspector Daknee. He's sure to inform me if anything suspicious transpires. By the way, I suppose you are aware that the annual Mahadeo Fair has come round again?"

"Has it? I clean forgot about the detested thing. When does it start?"

"In a few days."

"In that case I'd better be there myself, eh?" Kavanagh nodded.

"I can leave Maud at her sister's place here, in Burrangar a week or so more. She won't mind as the change appears to be doing her good."

"Excuse me now," said Kavanagh. "I must buzz off or Kate will be wondering what has become of me."

" You never told me your wife was here tonight, " I remarked as I prepared to accompany him. " I should like to see her."

" Come on, " said Kavanagh. " Kate will be delighted! "

" This is, indeed, a pleasure, " said Kate as she started off for the next dance. " I thought I recognised your wife, Maud, amongst the dancers, but I was not quite sure."

" Yes, Maud is here and I daresay is enjoying herself."

" Hush! " whispered Kate, " here they come."

" Who? " I enquired.

" Maud and Major Savage. Their third dance together since we came."

I turned my head ever so slightly, but caught a glance from Maud's eyes as she and the Major swept past us. There was a look of defiance beneath the gesture, I thought, as if she meant to show me she did not care with whom I danced. But if Maud felt nettled at seeing me with Kate Kavanagh, I felt doubly so at seeing her with Major Savage, and this their third successive dance together, according to Kate. I resolved to speak to her and warn her of the folly of giving gossip a handle.

" If Major Savage thinks he is making me jealous, he is mightily mistaken, " I heard Kate say. " I would never exchange my John for a thousand like him. I long ago made up my mind that marriage to Major Savage would mean a life of misery for me."

" Quite right, " I assented. " You've got a far and away better husband in John than you could ever have hoped for in the other."

" Yes—I know, " said Kate, " and I'm glad you think so too."

The dance ended, I lost no time in seeking out Maud. Major Savage was still with her, seated at her side; but he moved away when he saw me approaching. Rachel, too, I noticed had shifted her position somewhat farther away from her sister.

There was the glint of battle in Maud's eye as I took the seat just vacated by the Major next to hers; but she condescended to say with an assumption of gaiety, neither of us was feeling, I'm sure. " Well, Dennis, enjoying yourself? " I am!"

" But, Maud, " I protested in an undertone as I drew my chair closer to hers, " don't you realise that you are likely to be talked about, if you go on dancing with Major Savage in the way you are doing? "

"What do I care what people say?" Maud made answer in her most truculent manner. "My step suits Major Savage's and his mine. So there's an end to the matter let people say what they please."

"But your good name—and mine," I persisted.

She shrugged her shoulders. "I'm here to enjoy myself, and I mean to" was all she would say.

"Well then, let me have the next dance with you," I suggested.

"I'm sorry," said Maud, "I've promised it to Major Savage. See, here he comes to claim it."

I rose to my feet disappointed and angry, and as I did so my eyes wandered off in the direction of Rachel Towner. There was a look of sympathy in her eyes, I could see.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE Mahadeo Fair! How well I remembered all the circumstances connected with my first visit to this place. Hetty's strange feeling of fear as she hurried me away from the temple precincts, my own uncanny sensations as I gazed at the awesome features of the dread image of Kali, our great anxiety concerning Kate Westerley's mysterious disappearance—How all these things came back to me in a flood of memories!

And here was I, a year later, prepared to undergo the same experience.

There were the old crowds of devotees, the same noisy clamour of the Fair as I had witnessed last time as John Kavanagh and I walked together towards the temple.

"All seems quite familiar, doesn't it, Sir," said Kavanagh as we made our way up the temple steps. "I've made one round of the premises already. Even the old dodger, Kashi-nath Ghorpade, is back again, though I could see by the wary eye he kept on me that he suspects I am after him."

My first surprise on entering the main temple was to find it densely packed with a crowd who were craning their necks in their endeavours to catch glimpses of a woman dancing in the centre of the place. The dancer, I saw, was none other than Mrs. Bodh, while seated on the ground vigorously plying his bow to the *sarangi* was Mahadeo Narayan Bodh.

"Still in search of their little son," I mentally commented, and took no further notice of the pair. Bodh, himself, would prefer it should be so. I felt convinced that he and his wife might be left to pursue their search after their own manner.

Following Kavanagh's lead, therefore, I made my way to the rear of the temple, where from a high bastion we were afforded a panoramic view of the country beyond and of the vast crowds who had assembled for the festival.

Meanwhile, the noise and clamour inside the temple itself had been growing in volume and intensity. To the continual throbbing of drums and clang of cymbals was now added the chant of human voices with what I thought was a unified refrain, when the entire assemblage shouted together "____ Jai____!"

I could not catch what the other word was, but it sounded strangely like "Mahavira," I thought I turned to listen intently and noticed that John Kavanagh had drawn out his revolver and was following with sparkling eyes the course of a palanquin which was just then entering the shrine of Kali. The shrill blast of a conch drew my gaze to what appeared to be a small palanquin in which were seated two tiny figures ablaze with diamond jewellery who seemed to be receiving the homage of the multitude.

"Jai Mahavira!" I heard the cry distinctly this time as the palanquin disappeared into the interior of Kali's shrine.

With a bound John Kavanagh sprang from the platform on which we were standing and began hurrying towards the shrine.

I followed him as best I could, elbowing my way through the crowd. It was not an easy thing finding a passage through so dense a throng all of whom were bent on going in the same direction as ourselves.

John Kavanagh, by reason of his great strength, had progressed much faster than I had when it became a question of getting a shove on through a multitude. He was close to the entrance of Kali's shrine when a piercing scream as of an agonised woman rent the air, followed by a whole chorus of others.

Swayed as though by a single impulse, the crowd stood stockstill, craning their necks to see what had occurred.

Through the door of Kali's shrine, struggling and screaming, a child clasped to her bosom and two men clinging desperately to her wrists and arms while a third man struck wildly at the faces of the other two with his fists, came the woman.

The woman, I saw at once from the colour of her garments, was Mrs. Bodh. Her hair was dishevelled and her dress torn to tatters, but she held her little son firmly out of reach of her assailants.

Then John Kavanagh's revolver cracked twice in quick succession. There was a convulsive gasp among the throng and a panic started. Out of the shrine and down the temple steps the people rushed madly, gripped by a common fear that the police were using their firearms. I had the greatest

difficulty in keeping my feet among the jostling mass, people dashing against me and throwing me this way and that. Among the fleeing multitude I thought I recognised Sardar Mattay. He passed quite close to me, naked to the waist, his body smeared with the caste marks of the perfervid devotee.

By the time I reached the entrance to the shrine, the area was more or less clear of people. Kavanagh was giving orders to his men as fast as they hurried up. On the floor lay the bodies of two men which the constables were just on the point of carrying out into the open. One, I saw, was the old fox, Kashinath Ghorpade. So, that was the end of him. The other, I learnt from Kavanagh was a man named Girr Singh, a servant in the employ of Sardar Mattay.

"Girr Singh! I wonder if he is the same Girr Singh of Hetty's last letter."

Of Mr. and Mrs. Bodh I saw nothing but Kavanagh assured me they were safe under the protection of Sub-Inspector Daknee.

Inside the shrine the image of Kali still stood on its pedestal, with protruding tongue looking down on a scene of destruction. The votive offerings lay scattered about the floor with gold and diamond ornaments thrown promiscuously hither and thither. Two little plush-cushioned chairs, facing the image, had been broken to bits and trampled upon.

"What was the game?" I asked Kavanagh as soon as I could have a word with him.

"The old one, a sacrifice to Kali. Anyway, we were better prepared for them this time. By the way, Sir, I forgot to mention that your little son, Cyril, was the great "Mahavira" the crowd was hailing as they came in and Bodh's son was to have been the sacrifice."

"Good God, you don't mean to say so? My son!" I exclaimed in a hoarse choking voice. "Where is he?"

"Oh! He's safe with his mother," Kavanagh made answer with a smile.

"With his mother?" cried I, still more troubled. "What do you mean?"

"Well, Sir," Kavanagh replied in a more soothing tone, "the fact is Mrs.—Hetty—" he hesitated to say "Claire" came out from England a day or two ago, and is putting up with Kate and myself. She was here a short while back when I handed Cyril to her safe and sound...."

Kavanagh could see from the look of incredulity on my face that I did not know what to make of the whole thing.

"Hetty here and gone again in a flash? Quick work," I managed to say.

"Yes, Sir," Kavanagh assented. "I think she must have seen you jostling your way through the crowd, as she snatched Cyril from me, and darted away. I told off a couple of my men to see her safely home. She cannot have got very far even now."

Without another word I hastened towards the temple, the paternal instinct or whatever else it might be, lending speed to my footsteps.

At the bottom of the stairs I caught a glimpse of Hetty and her guards pushing through the still frantic crowds. With a series of bounds I soon came close enough behind her to hear her sobs as she turned every now and again to kiss Cyril.

"Hetty," I cried in hoarse, throaty tones, "Hetty, stop a moment, I—I—I want to see Cyril."

She drew up at hearing my voice and faced about.

"O, Arthur," she cried seeing me, "Look at him; Isn't he a cherub, and all without his poor broken-hearted Mummy these several months?" She was now crying quite freely.

Without a word I took the child in my arms and folded him to my bosom.

"My own little son," I murmured, the tears welling up into my eyes as I beheld Cyril for the first time in my life, dressed though he was in all the frippery of tinsel bedecked garments.

"Hetty smiled through her tears as I fondled the child.

"Isn't he a little darling, Arthur?" she gurgled as she tried once more to take him from me.

But I resisted her. "Let me carry him a wee bit longer," I pleaded.

"I am staying at the Kavanagh's camp there," Hetty remarked apologetically.

"I know, Kavanagh told me. I shall see you home."

Hetty, I noticed, had grown slimmer than before and there were traces of grey at the corners near the ears.

"Arthur," she stopped suddenly to say, "you won't take Cyril from me, will you? He is all I have in the world, while you—you have Maud." Her tones were tremulous with agitation.

Oh, Maud! I had quite forgotten her.

"No," I said firmly. "You may keep Cyril with you; but you must let me see him when I have a mind to. I shall be responsible for his education."

"That's a promise?" said Hetty with relief.

"It's a promise," said I.

Hetty seemed to step out more briskly at that. Our path led us not far from one of the precipitous hills at the foot of which the fair was being held. The panic at the temple had apparently not affected this part, as the people were carrying on as usual.

"Look! Look!" cried Hetty all at once, pointing to the precipice, "a man seems to have fallen from the top. Good gracious! there's another."

I looked up in time to see the body of a man hurtling through the air, while borne on the breeze, came a distant cry that sounded like "Hur, Hur, Mahadeo."

The crowds began to surge towards the spot. "Come on, come on, it must be an accident," I urged as Hetty seemed disposed to stop and ask questions of the guards.

She followed me without another word.

Kate Kavanagh was standing at the entrance in their encampment as we reached it. I was grateful to her for saying nothing but just nodding a smiling welcome when she saw who her visitors were.

It was with something like a wrench at my heart that I kissed Cyril tenderly and handed him back to his mother. The touch of those baby hands as the little fellow held my face in his tiny palms for a brief moment lingered with me the rest of the day.

I was back at Beldia next day trying hard to distract my thoughts with work. Maud had not returned from Burranagar which afforded me some relief from awkward questions.

Towards midday John Kavanagh turned up.

"I accompanied Kate and the others part of the journey to Burranagar, and dropped off the train here to report," he said.

"I am extremely grateful to you and your wife for all your kindness to my little son and his mother, Kavanagh," I remarked.

"Oh! that's all right, Sir," he conceded. "I shall arrange for their passage as soon as I get back to Burranagar."

"Tell Hetty she can draw on me for her expenses. I had better give you a cheque. Hetty can fill it up."

With that I drew out and signed a cheque which I handed to John Kavanagh. He took it without a word and dropped it into his pocket-book.

"Just look at this," he said, handing me a slip of paper he picked out of his book. "It is what I came to tell you about."

I took the paper and read the following message scribbled in pencil :—

Now that my little son and his mother are in safe hands, I have resolved to fulfil my vow to the great Shri. No one is to blame for my death. It is quite voluntary.

Mahadeo Narayen Bodh.

"I found the paper in the pocket of one of the corpses at the foot of the precipice." Kavanagh explained. "The other corpse was identified as that of Sardar Mattay."

"Poor Bodh!" I commiserated. "That I should have been an involuntary witness of his act of self-immolation!"

"That is not all, Sir," Kavanagh went on. "I think I've got Madame Indiana and her gang safe under lock and key for the next three years at least; so I shall not trouble Scotland Yard about her for some time."

"Good! You seem to have cleared out these pests pretty thoroughly."

Kavanagh laughed as he rose to go.

Next day came and went and no Maud. I scented something wrong. The day after, however, there was a letter which confirmed all my worst suspicions :—

My dear Dennis, (Maud wrote)

You will be surprised, not to say shocked, at what I am about to say, but I have given the subject such careful thought that I can see no other way out of it. Hetty, I see, is back with your little son. You never really loved me in the manner you loved—and naturally still love, Hetty. I was only a passing fancy! A sort of stop-gap in your daily life. That is a position I can never tolerate, so I have made up my mind to leave the way clear for Hetty. Take her and the child back and be happy and try to forget me.

By the time you get this letter Major Savage and I will be far away on the ocean wave, beginning our lives together; so do not try to follow.

Tata for the last time, and ever so many thanks for all your kindness.

Yours very sincerely,
Maud.

"Oh! these women," I commented, as I put down the letter. "Was a man ever more tormented?"

I sat long and pondered on what had happened. Then I took up my pen and wrote out a telegram to Hetty—

"Do not sail. Shall provide home for you and Cyril Writing. Arthur."

